



Bullets

BAYOU

BISHOPS

L U C I A N B A N E

AUTOGRAPH PAGE

FANTASTIC FAN

FANTASTIC AUTHOR

**BULLETS
BAYOU BISHOPS
Book Thirteen**

By: Lucian Bane

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Dedicated to all my romantic fans. Thank you for helping me build this story. You'll find a list of all the games we played and the winners in the back-matter of this book!

Very Special Thanks To:

My Beautiful Wife

My Woman

My Warrior

My Piece of Awesome Ass

And To:

My Machete, My Robin, My Renegade.

Cheers to another amazing ride!

#queen of 'fuck-academy'

My Awesome Angels Flitting Hither and To:

Stacey Bates!

Michelle Boone!

Natasha Weir!
Ma Cherie!
I love all of you hard <3

My Content Hawks:
My Machete and Texas!
Once again, thank you ladies for ensuring mastery.
I know without a doubt we have another winner.
And with very few eggs to be found!
KOOMBA!

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RE-CAP FROM PATCHES

Patches ended an hour before the Hurricane was due to hit land. He'd *just* married Texas Tegan fas-fas in his apartment, and she screamed loud-loud about it, so, everybody and their momma knows God joined them together.

Then, Tate interrupted about the breaking water pipes which meant one of the mother's water broke. Which one? We're not sure at the end and we wanna know!

And Bullets. He got him a wife-beater to tend to and that gorgeous Viking princess who is ready to repay him in ways he ain't quite down for. Yet.

Lez get it.

CHAPTER ONE

Bullets made his way to the naked excuse of a man tied to the rack on their prison wall. Judging by the ragged breaths and bloody whelps on his skin, he'd rolled himself a vengeful number on the Judgment Dice. It heated his blood with a happy joy to see Fate's righteous intervention but it wasn't enough.

38 said their scum refused to talk with the usual methods, so it was on Bullets to loosen his tongue. And after hearing Mia imply the bastard raped her their entire marriage, he knew exactly the method to use. He wanted to use it on all the men in her clan after learning the piece of moral shit had bartered her body to the other husbands like a whore.

Bullets wasn't sure how he'd manage not to murder every one of them, trial or no trial. He'd eagerly pay whatever price just to be the one to carry it out nice and slow.

He stood before the sacrilegious excuse of a human, considering Means and Ways before walking to his medicine cabinet. He removed his shirt, one button at a time while eyeing the supplies on the shelf, his gaze landing on a *silent* perfection. He folded his shirt and set it on the stool, grabbing a syringe of lidocaine and returning to the wall, biting the cap off and spitting it on the floor.

"Wake up, *Barb.*"

The man jolted awake and Bullets smashed his face against the rack with one hand while stabbing the needle into his throat. He tossed the empty syringe on the floor then eyed the wild blue eyes before him with a smile. "It's time to eat your sins, son. Real *quiet* like."

Mia smiled as she cleaned the kitchen. Jericho Flint. He'd given her

something special and she would cherish it. Nobody had ever trusted her with something like a secret name. She wanted to show him what that meant. Everything he did for her deserved many gifts. She didn't have a lot of talents, but she would use the ones she did with all her heart and might.

His reaction to her age made her need to look in the spirit glass again. He said she was too young for marriage. But he'd also said she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She touched her smile with her fingers. What did the most beautiful woman look like in his perfect eyes? She had never wanted to see her own wretched face so badly. To think she pleased him even just a little brought unspeakable joy bubbling up and out of her in a giddy laugh.

Don't be childish.

She stifled the feelings but kept a tiny smile as she tidied the little kitchen till it looked thoroughly cared for and even loved. The way he made her feel. She couldn't wait to show him how skilled of a woman she was in the bedroom. Even the priest in their village said so.

Her smile slowly faded and she snatched hold of Jericho Flint's beautiful face before she could recall the ugly things. His was so fierce with truth and justice. Oh, he was breathtaking.

He'd left her to see about his prisoner. She hoped he'd be done soon, the Hurricane winds were beginning, and the trees lashed with whispers of a coming fury. As furious as Jericho Flint's passion for righting wrongs.

She could clean his guest room while she waited. And when she was done with that, she could do the same to his bedroom. Maybe she should do his bedroom first. Yes. Definitely his bedroom first.

Bullets moved the small table next to the sinner and set his soldering iron on it along with his skinning knife.

"I think it's only right that I tell you what's coming," he said to the heaving body bracketed to the board before him. He showed him both sides of his blade. "For removing delicate pieces." He aimed it at his groin. "Namely the cursed generations hanging between your legs."

Growls entered the man's breaths officially ragged now. He showed him the soldering tool next. "For sealing up the way to that perverse hell.

And ensure you live many *glorious* years in the error of your ways.”

He stood before the human imposter, taking hold of his jaw so their gazes met for many seconds. “You will rue the fucking day you *ever* met me, Vicki.”

He turned and put his gloves on, the latex giving a happy little snap as the man finally understood what was coming, thrashing in his restraints. Bullets whistled to the tune of the winds howling above as he turned and carefully worked his blade through that delicate *sack* of sins, letting Mia’s pain and sweet smile steady his vengeful hand. The lidocaine did a perfect job of silencing his screams, turning his sinner into a mime of agony before a very unimpressed universe. At least Bullets' universe.

When it was done, he set the bloody scrotum on a Styrofoam plate then turned. “Now for your Swamp-Sinners-Circumcision.” He sliced through the nerves on his glans, adding enough depth that all possibility of pleasure was removed while leaving the assurance of pain.

By the time he sealed the deal with his soldering tool, the anesthesia had worn off. That was okay. He couldn’t think of a more fitting closure than those agonizing screams declaring his sins and the weight of their judgment.

He tapped his face with a bloody glove and called to him over the racket. “It’s gonna be alright now, Vicki. This may even save your wicked soul from the eternal fires of hell if you’re smart about it.” A sly grin tugged at Bullets' mouth. “You know, we have a book of Wisdom in these swamps. Says if your balls cause you to sin...cut ‘em off and throw them away.” Bullets eyed the bloody lumps of flesh on the plate before regarding him again. “But why waste it?” He held his face, forcing his rolling eyes forward. “Wouldn’t this lesson go a lot farther if you had to eat your own sins?” He nodded a lot. “Yeah. You’re definitely having your balls for breakfast.” He let his grin get nice and big. “Sah-say-fuckin' bawn.”

Mia was down to cleaning under the bed when she encountered a box. Pulling it out, she stared at the large cigar box and opened it. A smile filled her heart and face at seeing the one thing she knew how to do really good. Knit!

She set it on the perfectly made bed and sat next to it. Needles, yarn,

and a pair of baby booties, one of them complete and the other halfway knitted. Who did it belong to? He didn't have a wife so... maybe a sister? But why would he have it? She examined the completed bootie in her hand and smiled at realizing she knew that stitch by heart. Her breath caught at the sudden idea. She could finish them. As one of her gifts! Somebody was having a baby or had a baby. By the generic white color, maybe it was unborn. They often used such colors in those cases in her clan.

She paused as a thought sent her pulse racing till her stomach got a familiar cramp. Their Volva said her womb was cursed and that's why she never conceived. She stroked the threads of the bootie in her hands as her lips trembled with the bone crushing longing and sadness. A sudden realization dawned on her. She should ask Jericho about it. Maybe he could see those things too. Maybe...maybe that too was one of their lies.

She quickly worked the needles and thread as hope surged. She shouldn't get ahead of herself with such a dream. Would be like dying twice if it turned out the witch was right.

It took her all of fifteen minutes to complete the adorable little booties. She smiled real big at how adorable they were, wondering how she should surprise him with this gift. She set them on his pillow with the needles placed next to it and angled her smile at it. Yes. He wouldn't miss it there.

She finished getting his bedroom perfect then paused, looking at the dresser. She glanced at the door and made her way to it, opening the top drawer. Her breath caught at finding everything neatly folded. Opening the second drawer, she found neat rows of white. She carefully lifted one, seeing it was a simple white T-shirt. She brought it to her nose and smelled, finding a delicious scent of pine and wood smoke. She pressed it into her face, closing her eyes and inhaling it in. So, so, wonderful. She looked at the door again then folded it carefully back, putting it perfectly in its place.

The next drawer held small clothing items made of the softest black suede. She turned them around, trying to understand what they were for. Seeing the extra material gathered at the front made her gasp. It was like a pouch for...a man's penis. Heat filled her cheeks and then did strange things in her blood as she quickly folded them back and put them exactly how she found them. She shut the drawer, trying to recall any of the men in her clan having clothing like that for covering their nakedness.

She gasped at hearing the front door and flew out the room, racing to

the little guest one and shutting herself in. Pressing her ear to the door, she listened to the momentum of his steps. Sounded weary. She hurried out of the room, finding him in the kitchen looking around. “Are you hungry?” she asked.

Her stomach tightened when he turned and aimed his beautiful anger at her. She couldn’t stop her smile at seeing it. He’d had it since he first laid eyes on her. So furious.

“You didn’t need to do all this.”

“All what?” she asked, moving herself closer to see him better. “I just cleaned.”

He looked around. “You... moved things.”

Oh no. He didn’t like that. “I can put it all back. I have a good memory.”

He eyed her for many seconds, his mirroring powers difficult for her to read.

“What are you seeing?” she couldn’t help but ask.

He lowered his gaze and walked right past her thundering heart. Panic hit her as she remembered she’d cleaned his room. Racing to the hall, she stopped when he went into the bathroom. She hadn’t cleaned there. Yet.

She didn’t have time to undo anything. What about the booties? What if he got mad about that? She hurried down the hall right as the toilet flushed. She stood trapped between the bathroom and his bedroom as the water ran next and her heart beat like a mean hammer in her chest. The door opened and she stared at him.

He stared back. “You okay?” he asked.

His goodness was soft and warm over her skin, and it caused her heart to pound harder. “I...I cleaned. Your room,” she whispered, closing her eyes when his beautiful brows pulled together. “I can put it all back.”

Her eyes popped open at the sound of his boots along the floor. He opened his bedroom door and stared. He made his way in, going straight to the bed where the booties were. What was she thinking? There were a million reasons why he might not want her doing what she had, even if she couldn’t fathom a single one! She was stupid to many things and ways, especially those that were not hers and his ways were not like hers.

“What is this?” she heard him mutter.

“I finished the booties,” she announced in a breathless rush,

remembering he wasn't cruel like other people.

"Where did you..." He suddenly knelt next to the bed and reached under it, pulling out the box. He stared in it then at the booties, his silence making her heart pound with a confusing fury.

"Somebody is having a baby and I thought...it would be nice to help finish it."

She swallowed as he sat slowly on the bed, staring into the box.

"I-I wanted to do something nice to say thank you. For... everything..."

She pressed herself against the wall as he set the box on the bed and walked past her right out the room.

Her entire body jerked at the slam of the front door.

It was just the wind.

She looked at the bed and the box, then at the air before her, unable to catch a full breath. She hurried to the bed and picked up a bootie, blinking around tears as she unraveled the thread till it was at the exact spot she'd found it. She took the other one and returned all the items to the box. She removed them, realizing he might not see them then laid them back on the bed.

She faced the room and hurried through it, returning everything to the way it was before, then did the same in the kitchen. She made her way to the guest room and paced. Should she fix that back too? She sat on the bed, covering her face with both hands, her injured eye throbbing angrily as tears flowed from them.

Stop being a child. He's a kind man. You can fix this.

A knock on the front door sent her straight to her feet. Was she to answer it? Who was it?

She headed out, eyeing the brown suede curtains covering the door window that rattled from the wind.

"It's 38," he yelled. "We need to talk, boss."

She recognized his voice from earlier and opened the door.

He hurried in and she shut it, saying, "He just left."

The man turned and looked at her. "Where the hell he go?"

"I don't know," she said, gripping the doorknob behind her. "Is... everything okay?"

He aimed dark eyes at her, full of serious and ugly important things.

“Nothing you need to worry about, lil’ one.”

“I...I cleaned up.” She aimed her eyes at the floor. “I think he doesn’t like when...people move his things,” she said, hoping to learn exactly how bad her sin was.

He let out a strange breath and she looked up, seeing his odd smile. “That’s an understatement.”

Oh no.

“I cleaned his room too,” she added quietly.

His look of worry made her stomach sick.

“I...I found a box of knitting under his bed. Does he...have a sister that...is having a baby? They weren’t finished,” she whispered, feeling dizzy. “I thought...it would be nice to finish them.” She covered her mouth when a look of dread filled his face. “He seemed very upset,” she gasped. “I put them back the way they were, I was just trying to help.”

“Ma’am,” he said, his voice going low as he lowered his head. “Look, I’m...sure it’s alright.” He raised a painful gaze. “It’s not my place to say any of this, but...he lost most of his immediate family when he was five. A freak earthquake up in Montana.”

She covered her face with both hands, a sob escaping. “What...were the booties for you think?” she barely managed.

“I really can’t be sure,” he mumbled, the pain in his deep voice cutting her. “He came here to live with his grandma. I know his momma was... with child. It coulda’ belonged to her but I can’t be sure.”

Mia hurried out and closed herself in the guest room, letting her sobs go. What had she done to her beautiful Jericho? How would she ever fix this?

Fifteen minutes was all it took for Mia’s worried face to scar Jericho’s retinas. He couldn’t leave her alone in this storm. Or any other time. Not with her sick family on the loose. If he had his way, he’d see all their fucking balls on a Styrofoam plate. She was nothing but sweet and he’d not meant to fucking *react* the way he had.

Entering the house, he shut the door and listened. He made his way to the hall and knocked on her door. “Mia?”

“Yes?”

The pain in her voice twisted like a knife in his gut. “Thank you,” he made himself say. “For cleaning. And...” He swallowed the words, shaking his head. “For cleaning.”

He pried himself away from the door, ready to shower his own sins off after he checked on the storm’s latest update. Last he looked, the messy side of the beast would hit east of them. Maybe it would crawl right into the dirty ass side of New Orleans and pass a mop on that moral mess there.

With one pair of nuts on a plate, his vengeance remained at a cock-licking lust. Only there wasn’t a fucking thing erotic about it this time. Entering his room after his shower, he froze and looked around. Was like somebody had turned back the clock to before Mia’s cleaning spree. The knots in his stomach burned as he approached his siblings’ baby booties on the bed. Another reversal of time. Why should the sight of that hurt more than seeing them finished?

Because you’re a fucking asshole.

He knelt and retrieved the box under the bed and gently returned the items to their frozen place in time. Why did keeping them exactly the same even mean something to him?

He pulled up the weather app on his phone and checked the Hurricane, nodding at the path it was on. “Keep on scooting your glorious ass east,” he muttered, setting it on the side table and heading to the lights. He eyed the glow of the lamp at the bottom of her door, wondering if the storm bothered her.

He made his way to her door, not sure how to ask that. What if it *did* bother her? Then what? He tapped his knuckles on the wood. “Let me know if the storm bothers you,” he called. “I’ll stay awake with you if it does.”

Back in his bed, he went over the day’s events behind closed eyelids, ending at the climactic ball removal event. The sound of his screams ushered him into the arms of blood-soaked dreams where insatiable wrath orchestrated his most gruesome fantasies.

CHAPTER TWO

“It’s Mrs. Deveroux. Her water just broke,” Sarah called as he was headed to Becky’s room. He redirected his steps, bracing for all the coming surprises he felt in his bones.

“Anything I can do?” Tate asked, outside the room door.

“Let your sister know what’s going on while I check her,” Patches said. “She’s one of our pistols.”

“And what does that mean?” Tate wondered, as Patches grabbed hold of the door handle.

“Means she shoots these babies out fast.” He entered to her already on sharp, rapid breaths.

“Did we check her?” Patches asked, going to her side.

“Thought you might want to.”

“Yes, thank you.” He hated guessing if they’d measured those things right or if the nurses’ measurement was different than his by a millimeter. They all thought he was too anal about it but when it came to his mothers, he always erred to the side of caution.

“Lacey, I should’ve known you’d be the first to go. You ready for this?”

“So ready!” she gasped, nodding. “He’s coming fast too.”

“Let me check you so we can see just how fast.”

She nodded through her breathing as her mother held her hand and encouraged her in soft French.

Patches gloved up and navigated his hand under the covers. “Can you pull your knees up for me Lacey?” He pushed in carefully, feeling her cervix with his eyes closed. “She’s a good six,” he said to Sarah. “I’ll go check the other mothers. Get everything ready for a delivery.”

“Yes sir,” she said.

He sensed a bit of chill in her attitude but was grateful it wasn’t

touching her performance. “Sarah will get you ready to deliver while I check on our other mothers,” he called to her, getting a bunch of determined nods again.

He walked out and spotted Tegan and Tate near Becky’s room and made his way over. “Tate, you mind hanging around Miss Sarah for the rest of the night? I’ll let her know you’re there to assist and she’ll get you dressed for the occasion, whatever that might be.”

“Me?” he whispered with huge eyes.

“You’ll just be there to hand her things or move anything heavy in case we get short of nurses.”

They all ducked at the loud bang on the metal roof. Patches looked up, hearing the wind howling. “Hello Hurricane Nikolas. Be nice to my baby.”

He looked at Tegan. “You’re with me for now. I’ll direct you as is needed.”

She nodded and he wondered if the fear in her eyes was from the storm or the sound of Lacey’s labor getting intense.

He squeezed her shoulder, drawing her gaze. “We’ll be fine. This place is built for much more than any hurricane can give.”

She nodded more. “We checkin’ Becky?”

“We are, then Mrs. Boutine. We’ll be delivering Mrs. Deveroux in probably thirty minutes.”

“Thirty?” she gasped, wide-eyed.

“Yes ma’am,” he said, eyeing Tate. “You ready for this?”

He threw his arms out. “Hey, I’m your cowboy. Point me to the rodeo.”

“Sarah is your rodeo.”

“Be nice,” Tegan hissed as he headed out.

“Don’t tell *me* that,” he laughed over his shoulder. “She’s scarier than this hurricane.”

Patches had to grin as he looked at Tegan, wanting to kiss her but not wanting to cause more stress with all the eyes that might be watching. He was sure every nurse was and reporting to Sarah.

Nitro stared at his phone screen as Eveque wrapped up their virtual meeting.

“Once this storm passes, we’ll use 8-Bit’s coordinates and get all thirteen of them bastards. They won’t be going anywhere quick even when it’s over.”

“Permission to speak,” Seer said.

“Go,” Eveque urged.

“Ma Pier says the moles won’t expect us the day after the storm. We’d like to get the boy at first light.”

Nitro stood and paced in the small bathroom in the Basilique, his sharpened hearing picking up Felix’s laugh from Eveque’s phone. She was with the women in the main house kitchen where they cooked and listened to blaring music, mocking the hurricane raging outside.

“Who will you take?”

Nitro paused at Eveque’s question, waiting for Seer’s answer.

“We were thinking Lesion and Nitro.”

Eveque sighed. “Mon Frier.”

Nitro hit the speak button. “I’m fine, I can do it,” Nitro said. “I wouldn’t if I wasn’t.”

“I’ll be there to watch him,” Lesion added.

“First we get those fucking rats,” Eveque said. “Then you can take whoever you want.”

“And this Ball is still happening on *All Saint’s Day*?” Hurricane wondered. “That’s this Sunday, you realize.”

“I do and it is,” Bishop muttered, sounding pissed. “Belle Eveque thinks it’s the best way to derail the growing she-shit-storm happening in our own waters. It’ll also give the appearance to any seeing eyes that it’s family business as usual. The more shit we have going on here, the less we look available to do much else. That arms shipment happens on the third. That’s next Tuesday. Once we have their weapons, the leverage is ours. Four days later, we have the arms relocated during the bat-tie.”

“We still killing all of them?” Spar asked, again getting Nitro’s attention.

Many seconds passed before he said, “Unless they change their line-up. And if that happens, our hands are ignorant.”

Which meant without sin, Nitro remembered.

“I’m sure you hear the ladies in the background,” Eveque said. “Sounds like supper is about ready. Y’all come eat. Or else Mah-Mah will take y’all some through this storm.”

They all chuckled while Nitro found 8-Bit’s number and called him, closing the group chat.

“Well, if it isn’t the infamous Bat King,” he answered.

“Aw yeah,” he muttered. “Can you send the coordinates to my phone so I can see how close these demons are to Felix’s place?”

“Sure thing. Stand by.”

Nitro shook his right arm when that tingle in his blood sharpened. “You doing okay, brother?” Nitro asked, still wondering what exactly had happened to him.

“I’ll fucking live,” he mumbled.

“So long as you got your Menou?” Nitro tested.

“Cat to you,” he said, his aggression making Nitro grin.

“Yes sir,” he said, holding his phone before him when it buzzed. Seeing the coordinates, he put it back to his ear. “Thank you, brother.”

“Where the fuck are you?” 8-Bit wondered. “Thought you were here with us.”

“I’m in the bathroom. The echo in the big room fucks with my ears. Be out in a bit to go and get some of that food. Fucking starving.” But not for food. For Felix. She seemed to be the only sustenance he needed. And he especially needed her now with the shit flooding his blood. It started the moment Seer had called and asked if he was able to go with them. And he was very fucking able.

“I’m right behind you,” 8-Bit said.

“See you there, brother. I’m escaping out the back door.”

Hurricane waited for his brothers’ attention.

“What’s this about?” Shank wondered, looking at the rest of the four brothers Hurricane asked to stay behind.

Hurricane spread his arms, ready to lay it out. “I been thinking. We’re the last of the twelve to pick a mate. Now, wait,” he hurried when they all bemoaned the topic.

“I don’t see Bullets here,” Bacon said, glancing around then back at him.

“Well, I spoke to 38 earlier,” Hurricane muttered with his brows up, stuffing his hands in his front pockets. “Let’s just say it’s obvious where *that’s* headed.”

“Really?” Shank said, amazed. “He’s picking a *Viking* woman?”

“I ain’t positive,” Hurricane said, kinda disappointed. “That means so far, out of The Twelve, only two picked a swamp gal. Nitro and 8-Bit. And now Patches done dropped his swamp picks for a Texan.”

“Since when?” Spar demanded quietly. “He’d already picked I thought?”

“Oh, he had. Was on dating them to make a final selection when a Texas whirlwind happened. A *very* reliable source told me that *everybody* in the whole hospital heard our Doc making things *quite* official with Miss Texas. And from what I gather, he married her *reeeeeall good*.”

“What the *actual* hell,” Traps marveled, shaking his head.

“So, what you thinking?” Shank wondered.

“Well, I’m thinking another very reliable source told me our swamp ladies aren’t just *getting* pissed, they’re uh...planning shit.”

“Planning *what* shit?” Spar asked, not the least convinced.

“That, I don’t know. But I do know now’s a bad time for this swamp to have pockets of pissed females. That’s like dirty landmines waiting to surprise explode your fuckin’ leg off.”

“And what the exact hell can we do about it?” Bacon begged with wonder.

“I don’t know,” Hurricane said. “But we’re the last five with options on that front.”

“Fuck,” Traps growled. “I already don’t know who to pick and now you’re telling me I need to pick a woman that could fix this clusterfuck?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying,” Shank demanded. “You got *something* in that hurricane head of yours.”

“I got nothing but a lot of red flags with a ton of ways this can go and there’s only *one* option we have to handle that kind of mess.”

“The Fate Dice,” Bacon muttered, tossing his hand like he’d already lost.

“Exact-a-mundo,” Hurricane said.

Shank shook his head for several seconds then warned, “I don’t know, man.”

“What?” Hurricane challenged. “The Dice is how we always settled the things we couldn’t see. This is definitely one of those things. And a *lot* rides on it.”

“Fuck,” Bacon muttered with a huge breath.

“Spar?” Hurricane wondered, eyeing his giant brother staring into his future with perturbed brows.

He finally said, “I think it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard of doing.”

“Then again,” Shank said. “I’d damn well rather Fate be the blame for any fuck ups than me.”

“Bruh,” Hurricane laughed. “One hundred.”

“What all are we letting Fate decide?” Traps asked.

“Didn’t really think that far,” Hurricane realized. “I guess if we’re going that route, she should decide everything.”

“Uhhh, define *everything*,” Spar said, hesitant.

“That’s what I mean,” Hurricane said. “Fate should decide what gets decided by Fate.”

“So...Fate would pick our five, then our final?” Traps wondered.

“That’s what he just fucking said,” Shank kindly helped.

Traps crossed his tattooed arms over his chest with a contemplative nod.

Hurricane scanned their faces. “I think we should roll to see if we should hand it *all* over to Fate. Then that would settle that at least.”

Hurricane watched their stern contemplation for many seconds before adding, “We’re the last of what’s left. We’ve always sacrificed *everything* for the Hoard. We’re duty bound. This is what it’s come down to, our actual balls being called onto the table. I say we go out in a blaze of glory with this one. Bring it on. Love, hate, fat, skinny, mean, nice, it don’t matter,” he said shaking his head. “We take what we’re given, and we find a way cuz we *always* find a way.”

“Fuck it, I’m in,” Spar surrendered.

“Me too,” Shank added, getting Hurricane’s nodding grin.

“Wow,” Bacon said with a toss of his hand. “My grease is your

grease, brother.”

“Well, no matter what woman Fate gives me,” Traps said. “There ain’t *none* who can deny a good *rope*.”

“Hell yeah,” Hurricane said, putting his hand in the middle of their circle, grinning as they each added theirs on top. “That’s what I’m fucking *talking* about.”

“Let the Fate Dice roll,” Spar challenged.

“Let it fucking roll,” Hurricane added.”

“Let ‘er roll,” Shank said.

“Bring home the bacon and let her roll,” Bacon trumped.

“Bring all the dirty knots and kinky bows,” Traps declared loudly, grinning at them. “Red head, blond head, fat head, empty head, so long as she can *give* head. Les- say- la- bon- temp- roulette!”

Felix somehow *felt* Nitro and turned, looking around for him. Her pulse sped up as she made her way through the small crowd of ladies, searching. She went from one hall to another then gasped when a hand snatched her wrist and pulled her into a corner at the end of the hall. His fingers pressed into her entire lower face as he kissed her with such a ravenous hunger it got her drunk and clawing for more on the spot.

“You felt it,” he growled in her ear, his hand under her dress and gripping her pussy, squeezing till she cried out. “How did you know?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“You’ve been fucking calling me with this,” he said, pushing her ass into the wall by her pussy. “You want me to make you, is that it?” he whispered, his breaths shuddering with those growls that made her dizzy with lust.

“Yes,” she gasped, weak-kneed.

“I can’t do it here,” he said at her ear before biting the lobe between his teeth, varying between scary and terrifying. “I might kill the wrong people.”

He suddenly pulled her down the hallway, opening doors and shutting them. He finally found one that must be suitable and pulled her in, locking it.

She made out a desk and realized it was possibly a library of some

kind. Away from the noise, the winds growled and shook the windows like a setting in a horror movie. He scooped her off her feet and she gasped in surprise, grabbing hold of his neck. Their mouths collided and he groaned like her hunger pained him. She remembered her control and that she needed to use it to protect him from doing something they'd both regret.

"I want to fuck *you*," she gasped in his mouth. "I need to," she added, knowing her *need* was his submissive trigger.

Her feet touched the floor, and she swayed as he got out of his clothes. She realized she needed to do the same and quickly did, her eyes adjusting to the dark. He sat on a couch with his legs open for her, holding his dick in both hands while pumping his hips.

His one pretty blue eye flashed bright in the dark as she knelt between his legs and took his cock in her mouth. He grabbed her head, holding her still as seething growls filled his chest. "I can't take that," he grit. "It's too much." He jerked her onto his lap, forcing her to straddle him. "And you fucking *love* that," he accused.

His cock slid in so fast and hard it felt like a bomb exploded at her core. His hand bit down on her mouth, catching her scream as he gripped her hair.

"*Fuck* it!" he seethed, so pissed as he used his hold on her hair and mouth to force her. "I'm gonna slam you on my dick just like this till I come in your *greedy* cunt. And you know what comes after, don't you, that's what you fucking want, my teeth in that silky skin? Your fucking blood on my tongue and *lips*?"

She clenched her eyes tight as those words drove him closer to the edge, his breaths turning lustier with the dig of her nails. He fucked her with the same rage as the hurricane outside and then, like the eye of the storm, she was shifted to her hands and knees. Then he hit again with a fury, a hammer against her cervix. Oh God, it was so much.

"Come here," he gasped, pulling her upper body against him, his iron arms a harness over her breasts. The position put her knees wide open as the pounds returned. His animal orgasm built, a steady flow of rough growls now penetrating her back as she clutched his forearms over her chest. The feeling of being trapped against his hard body flooded her with euphoria just as she felt hot saliva dripping onto her shoulder.

Oh God, oh God, it was coming.

His hips moved at a frantic speed just before a final thrust came with the slam of his mouth and teeth and cock. The combination brought her piercing scream as she ripped through flesh with her nails. His hand covered her pussy, a vigorous smashing against her clit that brought her orgasm with a white, hot oblivion of raw power.

She became aware of his ragged moans blasting next to her ear as he saturated the bite with more saliva, bringing a warm tingle blending with the throbbing pain. His hand shook as he stroked her head and kissed her wound so carefully, making her feel precious even if every bit of what they did was insane. She didn't care. She loved him more than anything. And he loved her the very same. What could ever be more than that?

Your life, he'd say.

"Baby," he croaked around soft kisses along the side of her face. "I don't fucking like this. It's not getting better. Not this part. I can't keep doing this to you," he said, catching his breath.

Hearing the terror in his voice, she managed to move so he held her in his arms on the wood floor. "We'll work on something."

"And you love it as much as I do," he whispered, baffled.

"I'm the reason you love it," she murmured.

"Don't fucking do that, Felix."

"I'm not blaming myself for loving it, I'm just stating the facts." She kissed along his chest, taking his nipple into her mouth.

"And your appetite is somehow *bigger* than mine," he marveled.

She smiled and snuggled her face against him as her body throbbed and shook in their lust-war aftermath. "I can't help how much I love you. I'm not sorry."

He covered her body with his leg and crushed her to him with a groan. "Neither am I," he confessed, pressing firm kisses on her forehead. "But I still need brakes on this stuff. Bumper rails."

"I can make a harness for my Bat King. I'll hold the leash. You'll learn to obey me?"

His laugh started low and deep then got bigger. "You're the *last* person who needs to be in control of my leash, my beautiful Bat Queen. You're fucking *crazy* when you're wanting that juice. And it makes *me* so fucking crazy to give it."

"Mmmm," she moaned.

“Fuck, stop.” He made his way up and helped her to her feet. “You can barely stand,” he said, pissed.

“Just a little sore.”

“What a sick pair we are.”

She wrapped her arms around him, and he returned the embrace so hard she groaned then squealed, laughing. “You’re hurting me!”

He immediately captured her face in his hands and kissed her. Her heart turned so hot in her chest at how soft and careful he was. Okay and nasty. God, the way his tongue licked with a devious leisure along hers. Reminding her of that animal lurking just beneath his skin. In his blood. And now in hers. It was remarkable. Phenomenal. Confounding. And she never loved anything so much.

Except him.

CHAPTER THREE

“Becky’s having consistent contractions,” a nurse called at the door, sending Tegan’s pulse in her throat as she watched Patches holding the head of a baby while telling the screaming mother to push. Then just like that, the little thing slid all the way out. She couldn’t breathe as he held the tiny human in both hands while Sarah clamped the umbilical cord then used a suction tool in its nose and mouth. It let out a screech that grew into a lusty cry and all her breath left her in utter relief!

“What the hell did I just watch?” Tate whispered as Tegan turned and gave him a huge hug with a laugh before getting back to the show where they were wrapping the baby in a soft white blanket.

“Great job, momma,” Patches called where he removed his gloves at the trashcan, glancing over his shoulder at her. Tegan suddenly felt very little and out of place in there with such amazing things happening. And he looked like it was just your average stroll in the park rather than helping a whole little person being born into the world.

“Gonna go check on our other mother,” he said as he headed to the door and flicked his head once at her.

She looked at Tate who widened his eyes with a *don’t leave me* look and she widened hers right back with a *I got to!* as she followed Patches out.

She hurried after him across the open corridor and entered Becky’s room. “It’s coming Dr, it’s coming finally!”

“He’s a lazy one,” Patches said with a laugh as Tegan hurried to the bed and grabbed her hand, squeezing it as she breathed through shaky breaths.

“Are you hurting?” Tegan asked.

She shook her head. “Not really, not too much. I’m just so nervous,” she whispered, looking at Patches. “Can I have some water?”

“Yes, but just sips.”

“I’ll get it.” Tegan hurried as Patches cooed things in French to her while stroking her forehead. She loved that he was so much nicer with poor Becky. Those other women had plenty of people spoiling them, Becky had nobody. She remembered the Belle Eveque’s agenda and made a mental note to tell her or her husband to visit the father and have a serious talking to. She couldn’t bring herself to call him her husband.

“Would you like Tegan to be your bed nurse during this event?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she said between breaths. “I want that, please. I-I don’t mean anything bad on the other nurses, I just love my Texas Tegan.”

Tegan’s heart melted at the term.

“Then she’ll assist me.”

Becky suddenly whispered something in French to him.

“You have nothing to be scared of,” he said. “I promise. We have everything we need if anything goes wrong, okay? Now I’m going to check and see how far along you are. Ready for that?”

She nodded as Tegan hurried to the other side of the bed and gave her the cup of water. “Tell me what to do Dr. Patches,” she said, eyeing him across the bed.

“Just hold her hand for now, Miss Texas while I check her progress. Can you bend your knees for me.”

Tegan took her cup and set it down, helping her get her legs up and open while keeping her covered.

She eyed Patches’ face, so serious as he checked her, his eyes on the air between them. “You...are a solid three centimeters, angel,” he mumbled, turning and making his way to the trash can and removing his gloves as Tegan smiled at her.

“Just seven more to go,” she said, wishing she knew more baby-having-jargon. She shoulda read up on this, but she really didn’t expect it, even while being told the woman was a week overdue. Dadgum, what else would be happening? She blamed the good sexy doctor for sucking the common sense right out of her.

“We’ll get you hooked up and on the monitor unless you’d like to take a stroll to help things along?”

“I can help with that,” Tegan said, eager to do something useful.

“I would *love* that,” Becky whispered, nodding. “I always felt like if I

had just walked a little more for the other ones, things woulda gone better.”

“She did say that,” Patches said.

Tegan looked at him and he winked while helping Becky out of the bed.

“Over here, Nurse Texas,” he said. “You’ll want to hold her arm and communicate. If she gets dizzy, we’ll want to put her back in the bed.”

Tegan stood on her right. “Okay.”

“I’ll make sure there’s a wheelchair nearby in case she needs to sit. I’ll go check our other mother. Be right back.” He leaned and kissed Tegan’s cheek, making them burn at Becky’s happy gasp and laugh.

“Oh how perfect,” she said, her eyes those half-moons as Becky led her toward the door. “Don’t let the other nurses see,” she whispered to Patches.

“Not yet,” he assured. “Only you for now.” He opened the door for them, and Becky patted his face as she made her way out. Tegan’s gaze locked on his then and every illicit thought filled his dark eyes till she forgot her name. He stepped behind her as she escorted Becky out and he gripped her ass right in the crack. She whacked behind her, knocking him away while eyeing his grin, so sexy and sinful and downright delicious.

She spotted Tate talking to Sarah at the counter, the woman’s smile a good indication he was up to his flirtings. That boy didn’t know how not to flirt with women. One day he’d learn in order to get him a good one, he’d need to pick only *one* to do that with. Guess he was just *practicing* on Nurse Sarah the lying, two-faced saint.

Bacon stared at the table, shaking his head. Just *what* the hell were they doing rolling dice for a fucking *wife*? He’d done some crazy shit with The Twelve, but this was beyond *burnt*.

“You getting cold feet?”

Bacon glanced at Shank on his right. “My fuckin’ whole *body* is cold on this one. But I’m in this fridge with the rest of you dumb crumbs.”

He nodded and Bacon eyed the rest of them. “We rollin’ or what?”

Hurricane reached across the table with his fist and opened it, setting a single Fate Die down. “Who’s rolling first? Oldest?” He picked up the die

and rolled a NO. “He eyed Bacon. “On you, Little One.”

“Fuck me,” he muttered, reaching for the die, waiting for Hurricane to call the question.

“Will Bacon pick his five?” Hurricane asked.

Bacon took a breath and rolled the die.

NO.

Fuck.

“Divine Fate it is,” Hurricane said, looking around. “Who’s next?”

“Would be you, Blondie,” Bacon said.

Hurricane grinned and grabbed the die, staring right at him. “Same question for me.”

He rolled and Bacon eyed the cube, grinning. “And same answer.”

“Me next,” Spar said, snatching the cube and rolling it. “Same question.”

“Fate again,” Hurricane said, sliding the die to the center of the table.

Traps and Shank eyed each other. “Boy, don’t even wonder,” Shank said, nodding him to the die.

Traps took it and shook it in both hands at the left of his head. Then the right. Then above. He finally released it like it was on fire.

“FATE!” they yelled then laughed.

Traps grabbed the die and slammed it down before Shank, who scooped it up and chunked it back onto the table.

“Wow,” Hurricane said, looking around. “Fate wants a go at all of us.”

“Now what do we roll for?” Traps smacked both hands on the table, ready for more.

“Keep on?” Hurricane asked them.

“Ask Fate,” Shank said.

Hurricane tossed the die.

“YES,” Hurricane said. “Now what?”

“You’re the Die roller,” Spar said, not wanting any part of that.

Hurricane slid the die to Bacon. “We stick to youngest to oldest rolling.”

Bacon took the die, waiting for him to ask the next question.

“What five numbers...” He angled his head, thinking. “Do we start from the beginning of our list to pick our first five?”

He nodded at Bacon, and he tossed the die. “YES.”

“Start with number one,” Hurricane said.

Bacon rolled getting a NO. He rolled again and got another NO. He rolled ten more times and got NO.

“Maybe you’re not getting married,” Spar said with a low laugh.

Bacon was kind of hoping that exact thing at this fucked up point. And then his next ten rolls fell YES and NO, alternating one after another.

Shank recorded them on his phone while Hurricane started his own death sentence and Bacon pulled out his phone, finding the list of fifty women Belle Eveque had whittled down from three hundred. “Text me my numbers,” Bacon told Shank who nodded from his calm, reclined spot while recording Hurricane’s Fate.

His phone pinged and he looked while his pulse drummed with doom.
13, 15, 17, 19, 21.

All odd fucking numbers. He was getting an *odd* fucking wife, he knew it with all his twisted guts.

He finally located the names, and his dread grew as he typed all the holy fucks onto another screen. First holy fuck—he didn’t know or recognize a single damn one of them. Second holy fuck—nobody with brain matter named their kids this bullshit which meant said kids would be just as he first guessed—totally fucked up.

“What you shaking your head over?” Shank muttered with a grinning tone.

Bacon couldn’t stop as the *fucking no* gained momentum. “I don’t... normally judge a person by their name but...”

“What’s their names?” Spar wondered while he sat tongue tied.

“His head is *still* shaking, bruh,” Hurricane said, his chuckles giddy.

Bacon slid his phone to Shank while dreading the next step. Looking them up.

Shank’s laughter belted out real big while Bacon searched his pocket for a mint even while knowing the need to pass out had nothing to do with sugar levels.

Shank read out their names in between howling guffaws, “BERTHADINE, PHELONY, VERMINTINA, EULALIE AND FUCKING BEATRICE!”

The next five minutes were a blur for Bacon as they exchanged who

got who like they were comparing marbles. Bacon couldn't stand the torture and voted, "How about we finish this and find out who the *one* is."

"Did you look to see what your five look like?" Traps asked.

"Hell no," Bacon muttered. "And I just want to look at the *one*."

The sound of his door opening pulled Bullets right out of the gore, and he opened his eyes. His pulse was still racing as he saw Mia, standing there in a white gown. He sat up, realizing the wind was kicking hard outside. "You okay?"

"The storm," she whispered.

"I'll get up with you."

"Can I...just stay in here?"

The answer was no, she couldn't stay in there. Then the answer was why couldn't she? He grabbed the other pillow and put it in the center with his pillow. "You can sleep on that side."

She hurried and climbed into the bed, obviously terrified.

"You're fine," he said. "This house was built with this very storm in mind."

"Okay," she whispered.

He lay there for many minutes, waiting for her full body tremors to subside. "You cold?" he finally asked.

"No," she whispered.

"Don't like storms?"

"No," she said again while his overactive imagination went to work on what had happened to her, coming up with worst case scenarios with her evil clan.

He turned and kept the pillows between them and offered his arm. "You need something to hold?"

She snatched it with both hands and pulled it right to her warm body in a death grip.

Fuck me three times. What was I thinking?

He reminded himself how young she looked all while feeling her full breasts against his forearm. Not a fucking *young* thing about them.

Before he could hope of escaping unscathed, his cock gave a vicious

throb, putting him in quite a fucking fix as he fumbled with all his celibate decrees. But his cock wasn't hearing any of that worn-out sermon.

She's terrified, be a fucking man.

She yanked the lower pillow out from between them and glued her lower body to his.

"Mia," he warned as every muscle locked up.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "I'm scared."

Her body shook even more, and he tugged to get his arm free. "Let it go," he urged quietly.

She slowly released him, and he removed the other pillow. Her body became a magnet against his and Bullets jerked his hips back just before her ass found the evidence of his celibate lies. She could never think he was like those men who used her but there was no helping what his body was doing. Without a woman for eighteen years, you'd think he'd have more fucking control. Right then in that bed, the opposite was a sure truth as she again pressed his arm into her breasts and forced him to know just how childlike she wasn't.

Mia was playing with a big fire she knew. But Jericho was different. Not all men's fires were kindled the same, she knew that much. But to figure out his was proving to be difficult. She wouldn't force the fire, but she could be kindling in his strong hands. If he didn't respond to that, then she'd know this was not how to start his fire.

At some point in the night, her body gave up the fight. It was so very difficult to know what to feel and think about her process and this failure. Everything felt big as the world important. She'd used her body in a way she hadn't ever before, and the failure felt monumental. But she had a great big supply of hope inside her with Jericho. He was that kind of different where you knew nothing was to be quickly judged but studied and learned. She would study and learn him and know perfectly what he needed from her. And then she would do it with all her secret being's might. She'd never once thought of even using her secret being, not in her clan. She knew it didn't belong there and so she hid it deep inside. But with Jericho, she didn't need to hide it at all. Well...maybe a little. Till she knew his ways. Once she did,

then she'd bring out her secret self and give him every ounce of it.

“Becky, I think we need to get you back to bed,” Tegan said when she seemed to be stopping too often for too long.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Oh!”

“What!”

“My...my water.”

“Your water broke?” Tegan looked around. “Patches!” she yelled.

“TATE!”

They both came running from different directions. “What’s wrong?” Patches hurried.

“Her water broke!”

“Tate, get that wheelchair,” Patches ordered. “Don’t move, momma,” he said softly to her. “How are your contractions?”

She nodded, breathing. “Having another one.”

“I’ll check you when we get you in bed.” Tate moved the chair just behind her and held it while Patches and Tegan guided her into it.

“How’s the other mother?” Becky asked. “She close too?”

“She sure is. You ladies are putting this hurricane to shame.”

Back in the room, Tegan moved the covers aside as Patches helped her into the bed.

“Oh...oh...” Becky whispered.

“Okay, steady breaths, right doc?” Tegan said, breathing with Becky.

“That’s right. You’re doing amazing. I’ll wait till it passes and check you,” he said, getting his gloves on while Becky held her hand through the pain.

“They’re getting pretty strong,” Tegan said to Patches, hurrying to the sink and wetting a washcloth for her forehead while he moved her legs into place.

“I’m headed back to Sarah,” Tate said. “Before she comes hunting me down.”

“Thank you,” Patches said while Tegan folded the wet washcloth and patted her forehead.

“What is it?” Becky whispered as Patches again stared at the air

between them as he checked her.

“You’re a good six,” he said impressed, getting her huge, happy gasp.

“That’s good, yes?” Becky asked.

“It’s *very* good.”

She nodded. “I’m having another one.”

“Tegan, I’m gonna go check on the other mother and find a nurse to get Becky hooked up to a monitor so we can check the baby. I’ll be right back.”

“Got it, Doc,” she said, fighting to sound calm while her insides were shaking like crazy. “That’s it, Becky, work through it.” Lord they were getting strong quick. She hoped he hurried, she couldn’t stand seeing her in that much pain.

Becky’s breaths were starting to fill up with more vocals and for that sweet baby to let that kind of noise out meant only one thing. It must *really* hurt.

Dear God, help her through this. Help *me* help *her* through this!

Becky had three more contractions while Patches was out, all of them getting harder. Good Lord, was it supposed to get that bad so fast?

“Ohhhhhh, Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh,” Becky cried, before straining out a long moan then gasping for air. “It’s coming, it’s coming.” She pushed again, sending Tegan’s heart to her feet as she moved the covers to see. “I feel it!”

“I’ll go get Dr. Patches!”

“Hurry, it’s coming!”

Tegan didn’t make it to the door when he finally entered and she yelled, “She said it’s coming!”

He hurried to the bed and moved the covers while a nurse followed with a cart of equipment.

“Get that monitor on her,” Patches said. “Need to check the baby.”

God, he was worried, she could hear it. She looked at Becky and hurried to her side when another contraction came. “I’m here, hold my hand tight. Dr. Patches is checking you.”

“Breathe for me Becky,” he said, moving the blanket enough to get his hand under. “That’s a good girl, that’s it,” he said as the pain gradually grew, twisting Tegan’s guts. She realized she was squeezing Becky’s hand just as hard. She remembered the washcloth and put it on her forehead only to have Becky whack it off in between those breathing yells.

“You’re eight centimeters momma,” he called. “You’re getting very close. Hang in there for me, no pushing yet. That’s it, breathe just like that, you’re doing amazing!”

“Yes,” Tegan gasped, nodding at him and her. “You’re doing great. I’m sorry I can’t do more. Isn’t there anything for pain?” she asked Patches.

“Epidurals seem to slow her labors and I was hoping to get her farther along.”

“Now, then?” she asked as Becky’s cries took a downward spiral while Patches helped get a belt around her.

“This is to hear the baby,” he said to her. “Need to make sure he’s not struggling.”

She nodded a lot and reached for Becky’s hand. “I’m sorry, I never know what I need or want from one contraction to the other,” she whispered, licking her dry lips.

“Can she have ice?” Tegan wondered.

“Hold on,” Patches said, looking at the monitor and getting his stethoscope on and moving it around her belly while glancing back at the monitor.

The loud whoosh of a heartbeat crackled out of the speaker and Tegan realized she was holding her breath when it rushed out.

The door opened and Tate yelled, “She’s ready to push, we need you, Doc!”

“Tell Sarah she’ll need to handle it.” He turned to Becky and stroked her face. “The baby’s heart rate is strong, how are you feeling?”

She nodded, her breaths beginning to turn sharp.

“She’s having another one,” Tegan announced, bracing for it.

“Looks like this one isn’t playing around?” he said to Becky as he went to the front of the bed and two other nurses entered in with other equipment. He lifted her legs and moved the sheet, then unhooked something under the bed that allowed the lower half to part where he locked metal stirrups into place.

Tegan snapped her gaze back to Becky when her “Oh! Oh! Oh!” got gut wrenching, not sure what to do but let her squeeze the heck out of her hand. She glanced at Patches as he got her feet in the foot props.

“I’m going to check you one more time, Becky. We might not have time to give you that epidural, I think.”

He reached for the gloves the nurse handed him and put them on while Becky fought to breathe and not push. Tegan fought just to breathe when poor Becky failed and gave a grunted screaming push.

“The baby’s crowning,” Patches said to the nurse. Get everything ready for a delivery. “Becky,” he called out loud enough for her to hear. “After this contraction, I’m going to need you to get ready to give me some long hard pushes. You’re doing *so amazing*.”

Tegan used two hands to hold on to Becky as Patches hurried and removed his white jacket and put on a blue apron while the other nurse tied it behind him. They all moved like a well-oiled machine, and Tegan let that comfort her as she again regarded Becky.

“How you holding up, Texas?” Patches calmly asked, back between Becky’s legs.

“Trying to stay upright.”

He gave a low chuckle and even with everything going on, the sexy sound tickled her insides. “You’re doing amazing too,” he said.

“Yes!” Becky gasped, drawing Tegan’s gaze. “You’re doing great.” She nodded a lot, giving her a weak smile. “Thank you so much for being here.”

Mercy. “You gonna make me cry,” Tegan whispered.

“When your contraction comes, momma, I want you to take a big breath and push until I say stop.”

Two nurses moved about still, one getting equipment ready on a table right next to Patches, handing him a mask that he put on. She watched the other next to one of those small rolling baby beds, laying out items. Tegan spied the tiny little hat and blanket and her heart went pitter patter all over the place. She jerked her head back to Becky at hearing the contraction coming.

“Okay, when it gets to that pushing pain, I want you to take a deep breath and give me a long hard push,” he said, angling his head as he peered between her legs, his eyes flashing up to her. “Big deep breath now and give me that push.” He watched between her legs as Tegan held her hand with both of hers as a long, growling grunt strained out of her, her hand shaking in Tegan’s from the effort. “Don’t stop, push, push, push, the head is coming,” he called loudly. “Okay, take some breaths now.”

Becky let out a huge roar, gasping over and over.

“This next contraction, I want you to give me another one just like

that, okay?”

Becky nodded with her eyes closed, her jaw shaking with the rest of her body. Tegan looked at Patches and found his eyes locked on her.

“You’re okay baby,” he said. “You’re still doing so amazing too.”

Was he teasing her? She wasn’t sure and she was too worried to care with Becky’s next contraction coming for them. Oh God, please let her push that baby out this time!

“That’s good, big breath and give it all you got. Yes, you’re doing it, baby’s head is coming, keep going, keep going.”

Becky belted out a screaming growl that shocked the hell out of Tegan to hear such a thing from that angel.

“Heads out,” Patches announced with triumph, grabbing the suction tool and using it on its little nose and mouth. “Next contraction, you’ll finish this. You ready to meet your baby?”

“Yes, yes!” she gasped, breathing hard again then bearing down with all she had, giving another fierce growl.

“Becky!” he gasped, laughing. “You did it! You delivered this precious baby. We finally get to meet *Jeramiah Jacobs*.”

“It’s a boy?” she gasped, as tears flooded Tegan’s eyes and she kissed Becky’s hand.

“Oh my God, you’re my new hero!” Tegan gasped.

Becky let go a weak smile. “Can I see him?”

“You sure can.”

The door opened and Tate yelled, “Baby’s delivered!”

Tegan laughed at how he ran right back out. Her heart melted as Patches cuddled the bundle in his arms and slowly brought the baby to a crying momma. “You ready to meet the most amazing woman in the whole world, buddy? Yeah?”

They laughed as he gave three quick sneezes right as he set him in her arms.

“Oh God,” Tegan sobbed, wiping her eyes. “He’s perfect, isn’t he?”

Patches pulled his mask down and made his way around the bed to her. He scooped her up in a hug and squeezed her so tight. “Thank you, Texas,” he whispered in her ear, lifting her off her feet. “Mmm, I love you,” he said softly, turning the water works up till she was a blubbering mess. “Soon as we get everybody taken care of, you’re mine.”

Oh, holy hurricane, yes.

He set her down and turned to the nurse still between Becky's legs. "How's the afterbirth coming?"

"Perfect," the smiling petite brunette said. "It's all here."

Tegan turned to see the baby. She reached and stroked her finger over his silky little forehead. "He is so precious," Tegan said, her smile hurting as she leaned and hugged Becky best she could. "Hi sweet precious Jeramiah Jacobs. Wait till your *daddy* hears about you! And your sisters too, they are gonna fall head over heels for you."

"Wanna hold him?" Becky whispered.

Instant terror hit Tegan. "Oh my, I..."

"He won't break, here," she said, holding him up.

"Don't I need a mask?"

"Nah," she whispered.

Tegan carefully took the bundle and settled him in the crook of her arm, amazed with how perfect he fit there. "He's so *light*," she squeaked, blinking around tears as Patches made his way to her.

"Doesn't she look amazing holding the most adorable baby?" he cooed to Jeramiah. "Yeah? You think so too? Yes, she's very pretty," he said, making her and Becky laugh. "Of course, not as pretty as your momma."

Tegan stifled a sob, and he kissed her right on the mouth.

"She can sure be next," Becky said. "And come hell or high water, I'm gonna be right there by her precious side."

More tears. Oh dear lord, she wanted to pinch herself and make sure all of it was real. What in the world was all that stuff happening in her? She wanted to just keep crying but she wasn't sad in the least. And she didn't want to let the baby go, but she felt like she'd taken long enough. Oh God, a *baby*. A little, tiny *human*."

"She's a natural," Becky whispered.

"She is," Patches said. "But her new husband might be getting a little jealous."

Oh God, he was being too much. She was suddenly desperate to be alone with him.

Tegan reluctantly lowered the baby back down to Becky. "I'm gonna try and nurse him if y'all don't mind."

"Not at all, we'll give you privacy and I'll come check on you in

about an hour. Nurses will see to all the final details.” He lowered and kissed her forehead. “Such a good job momma,” he said softly before straightening to Becky’s beaming, proud face.

“Somebody can call Burt and let him know his Jeramiah Jacobs made it safe and sound, yes he sure did,” Becky whispered to the baby. “He’s gonna be so very happy.”

Nitro waited till Felix was entirely asleep before he very carefully untangled her from his limbs. He stood next to the bed, staring down at her. The sight of her caused his saliva glands to gush with the need to soothe... protect...and devour.

He closed his eyes, focusing on what he needed to do. He wasn’t waiting till morning to find those moles and risk losing them.

He got dressed and looked at his phone. Three AM. Storm still raging.

He slipped out the guest bedroom of the main house and crept his way to the back door. He quietly opened it, encountering the storm’s wrath at full force. Good thing these devils weren’t far. First, he’d go to Felix’s place first and check on his feathered brethren. He double checked he had the key to the low-profile boat. The plan was to ride hard and fast and pray he didn’t get thrown into a tree.

Getting to the pier was its own adventure as he dodged flying debris and pushed against the gusts when he wasn’t getting shoved every which way by them. Felt like thirty full minutes by the time he got to the boats that rocked and rolled as if in an earthquake.

He thought of all the innocent women these devils destroyed and pushed through the opposition. This was perfect timing. They’d never expect him.

Nitro fought to keep his balance in the boat as it rocked to the tune of five-foot waves. Once he got the motor on, he gunned it right as one of the swamp dragons nearly kissed him right in the face.

He managed to get to the main waterway where he lay low and opened up the motor. He soon realized the wind was moving in the same direction as he was. It was good he was travelling *with* the debris but bad that it was coming from behind him. He found himself praying again, not liking

that he only seemed to do that when he was in a bind. He made a quick agreement with the Man that he'd correct his ways in that department while refusing to tie his commitment to the request that he make it there in one piece.

Just when he thought he was lost, something above the howl of wind caught his ear. He finally realized what it was. Bats. He followed the racket right to Felix's place which turned out to be only a minute more. Docking the boat turned out to be impossible and he spotted a section of land he could possibly run the boat onto. He swung the boat around and again opened up the motor to get enough speed. He hit the land and was suddenly airborne, arms and legs flailing till he hit the ground several yards in. He groaned as he struggled to get his wind back. Holy fuck, that would leave a mark.

He finally got on his feet and fought his way to the house with his forearms over his head. The gusts shoved him around like he weighed nothing while pelting him with driving rain missile branches.

He made it to the porch finally, getting on his hands and knees, crawling the rest of the way. At the screen door, he opened it and the wind ripped it from his hands and plumb off the jamb before getting sucked into the powerful raging vortex. Holy fuck.

The door was locked. Fuck. He fought his way to his feet and rammed it with his body weight, busting through it. He hit the floor in the foyer and turned to shut the door, only to see he'd splintered that function from the frame.

He made his way to the room where she kept the Generals, his blood and skin itching and hot under his skin. He threw open the door and turned on the light as they all flocked to him, a hundred biting claws latching onto his soaking wet clothes. Chattering noises brought his laugh as he realized they were happy to see him. He held his arms open at his side, watching as they covered every inch of his skin with a tingling sensation. They were *licking him*.

He shuddered in his wet clothes and made his way out of the room, leaving the door open for them. In the bathroom, he stripped naked and turned on the shower.

He stood under the hot water, his blood tingling at every injury he'd won on the journey there. Fifteen minutes later, he stepped out of the shower, his complete rejuvenation astonishing him.

He headed out of the bathroom to look for dry clothes getting covered by bats again. “You gonna be my second skin?” he wondered as he made his way upstairs while they licked him dry. In the bedroom, he turned on the light, his stomach tensing at finding the scene where he’d first lost his shit with Felix.

He looked down at feeling his feathered brethren frolicking at his cock. “That’s for our Bat Queen,” he said, stifling a groan at the heat they were causing. He watched them licking at the slit, wondering what the fuck they were actually doing or thinking they were doing. Was this mating to them? Bonding? Eating? They’d done something to his sex drive and now he wondered if he was observing some kind of link.

He dropped his head back, gritting his teeth while wondering if...

He lowered his head with hot breaths as his lust for sex and blood filled his tongue till his mouth salivated. Suddenly the bats swarmed and covered him while others swirled around the room. “Oh fuck,” he gasped, realizing what was happening and unable to stop it. The prick of claws and bat wings moved like a wave over his skin while the bats on his cock seemed to get greedy. He stared at the surreal sight of tiny squirming bats covering him, a glove with a million teeth, digging and raking. Oh fuck, he was going to orgasm. Holy fuck, they were... His groans began to fill the room, growing louder as his climax surged up like a volcano. The screeches filled his ears, and he added his roar to it when they all *bit* him.

He was suddenly back on the bat-tie field at the moment of that three second attack. The floor suddenly slammed into his body and face just before darkness swept over him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shank finally caught his breath. Fuck, he needed that comic relief. He couldn't look at Bacon or he'd lose it again. His face. Like he'd been given terminal news. And fuck, maybe he had. Hell, maybe they all had. Five terminal possibilities. But only one terminal one you had to spend the rest of your life with. That was actually worse. You didn't get to check out of that.

"So, we looking or what?" Hurricane asked when they all had their *fateful* five.

"Ask fate," Shank said. "I'm hungry."

The shake of Bacon's head drew his grin. "How can you think of food right now?" he marveled.

"It is what it is from the moment we decided to do this," Shank said.

"Asking Fate," Hurricane said. "Should we roll to find *the one*." He tossed the die and Bacon's head fell back, making Shank laugh.

"At least you'll know *which* of those names you're getting," Shank chuckled.

Hurricane slid the die to Bacon. "You first, Lil' One."

"What's the question," Bacon muttered.

"Ask if number one is *the one*. And so on."

Shank suddenly wanted to see Bacon's list to know which was Phelony.

He tossed the die.

"NO," they all said.

He reached slowly forward and picked it up, dropping it.

"NO," they all called.

Again, he picked it up with a heavy sigh and let it slowly plop from his hand.

"NO," they laughed.

"The suspense alone is a *killer*," Shank decided with a grin.

He tossed the dice and they all yelled, “YES!”

“Number four. Who is number four?” Hurricane wondered.

Bacon slid his phone to Shank. “I can’t look.”

Shank took the phone and looked, barely catching the laugh before it belted out. He handed the phone to Spar on his right.

“Ohhhh, damn,” he muttered, handing it to Traps.”

Traps eyed all of them as he slid the phone off the table and slowly brought it up to his face like a secret hand of cards. The lines on his forehead slowly melted as his dark eyes raised to Bacon before sliding the phone to Hurricane next.

“Just fucking *tell* me,” Bacon shot out.

Hurricane looked and didn’t bother holding back his giggle and “Bruuuuuh.”

“Let’s just say,” Traps began. “I hope her ass is worth the... *crime* of such a name.”

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck!” Bacon said, shooting up from the table as they all let their laughs go.

“Come on,” Hurricane finally said. “Let’s take a peek at what she looks like!”

Bacon paced next to the table with his hands clasped behind his head.

“I think we should roll for that too,” Spar said as Bacon returned to his seat.

Shank reached out to pat his shoulder and got a *do it and see* look that had him chuckling again.

“Does Bacon look to see who his number one is?” Hurricane asked, tossing the die.

“YES!” they all yelled together.

“Pull her up,” Shank said. “Let’s see what’s on the Fate menu.”

“Spar,” Bacon said, sliding the phone to him. “The least of the cocksuckers at this table.” He nodded at their laughter. “Another round of ho-ho and ha-ha-ha’s on me. Just remember, Fate’s watching.”

Bacon gave a dry laugh and nodded at the sudden *oh shit* silence in the room.

All eyes were on Spar as he looked at the phone. The surprise in his raised brows and gradually widening eyes had Bacon groaning and Shank very curious. “Not gonna lie,” Spar said, sliding the phone to the middle of

the table where Shank snatched it to look. “She *is* beautiful.”

“Don’t’ fuck with me, man,” Bacon muttered.

“Well,” Shank said at the blond beauty with the gorgeous tits.

“Let me see,” Traps growled, yanking the phone.

Shank nodded as he looked. “Right?”

“Ask Fate if we can *trade*,” Traps suddenly demanded.

“Let me fucking see,” Bacon said, reaching for his phone only for Hurricane to grab it first.

“Hooooly earth shakers and movers, bruh!”

He slid it to Bacon and all eyes were on him as he looked.

“I’ll trade mine for her,” Hurricane said.

“You didn’t even *look* at yours!” Spar snapped.

“I can see her bound in rope,” Traps said as Bacon rose from his chair and paced with his phone, staring. “Digging deep into all that soft, abundant flesh. And those hips,” he hissed. “Her ass is—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Bacon snapped. “I’m...trying to think.”

“Ohhhhh,” Hurricane chuckled with glee. “Somebody’s already possessive.”

Bacon stared at the face on the screen while his brothers rolled to learn who their *one* was then whether or not they had to *see* her before the ball or just be *surprised*. He knew how he’d missed that angelic face on the screen. He’d used weight as criteria, and she never even made it into his first batch of picks. But the longer he stared at her, the more he marveled. How could a woman that size be *that* fucking beautiful? He angled his head, letting his gaze rest on her hips. This wasn’t the death sentence he’d imagined. At all. He was a chef. He could make *anything* taste good. She would drop the weight she needed to, and he’d help her. Yeah. He liked that idea. A lot.

Heroic food fantasies ensued as he imagined her losing the unhealthy weight while never knowing it because the food he’d prepare would bring orgasms to her mouth. And *fuck*... that *mouth*. So... fucking... perfect. Even overweight, her body had a classic sexiness to it. Her fucking tits were

phenomenal. Definitely didn't want her losing those.

He looked at her feet. Dainty little things. If he had to guess—and he really did—minus even *fifty* pounds, she'd be fucking killer sexy. Wow. He was going to be married to her.

“One more chance to trade before I look at my number *one*,” Traps said.

Bacon looked at him and shook his head. “A *definite* hell no to that.”

“Alright,” Traps grumbled, looking at his phone.

“Who is it?” Shank wondered when he made odd grumbling noises.

He tossed his phone onto the table, shaking his head and making Bacon laugh while Hurricane snatched his phone up.

“Ohhhhh, I know her!”

“Who is it?” Spar demanded.

“Look for yourself.” Hurricane slid the phone to him.

“Ha! The geeky librarian.”

“The *scrawny*, half-starved, geeky librarian,” Traps grumbled.

“I can fatten her up,” Bacon offered.

“Or you should just trade me, and you wouldn't have to.”

“Hurricane, roll and see if we can trade,” Shank muttered tiredly.

He picked up the die and rolled a big fat NO.

“Now we can shut up about that,” Shank said, turning his phone to all of them. “Meet Tabitha. My *one* and *only*.”

“Holy shit,” Hurricane mumbled. “What the fuck you do to piss off Fate, bruh?”

“Many things.”

“And you *still* agreed to this?”

He shrugged. “It's a woman. It's a marriage. She's ugly as fuck. I'm ugly as fuck. The job needed doing is fucking done.”

“Bruh, you're *not* this ugly,” Hurricane begged to differ.

“She could be...super nice,” Bacon offered, unable to hold down his grin.

“I'm sure she is,” Shank said, moving to stand.

“She could be ugly and mean too,” Spar offered.

“I might be fucking pissed if I looked like that,” Hurricane said.

Shank slammed a hand on the table, glaring at Hurricane. “That's my wife you're talking about. *Bruh*.”

He held up both hands. “Sorry man,” he said lightly. “Who’d you get?” he asked Spar.

Spar shook his head. “Ain’t it your turn to show? Blondie?”

“Fate said I don’t have to look,” he reminded.

“Ah yes. You get to be ‘*surpriiiiiised*,” Spar sang with fluttering hands at his head. “Can’t wait.”

“So…” Hurricane pressed, eyeing Spar. “Spill it.”

“Fate never said we had to share that info.”

Hurricane’s lip quirked with a pained brow. “That bad?”

“Not biting.”

“Can we meet them before the party?” Bacon asked. “See what kind of women they are?”

“Why does it matter?” Shank muttered. “It’s done. And I’m going eat.”

“Just to know,” Bacon said.

“I don’t want to,” Shank assured.

“Let Fate decide,” Bacon said, playing that card right back on them.

Hurricane snatched up the die. “Should we *all* meet the women once before the party?” He rolled the die and Bacon grinned.

“YES.”

“How the hell we supposed to do that without telling them why?” Shank asked.

“Weren’t we supposed to have an interview?” Bacon wondered, trying to remember.

“Damn. Right,” Spar remembered.

“Who’s gonna set that up? I vote Hurricane,” Traps said.

Hurricane grabbed the die and shook it then paused. “How am I supposed to meet her if I have to wait till the ball?”

“It never said you *couldn’t* look,” Shank corrected. “Said you didn’t have to.”

“We’re doing this as a team,” Traps reminded him.

“Bruh, fine,” he muttered, picking up his phone. They all watched as he stared at the screen. His face slowly crimped with disgusted pain.

“Noooooooooooo,” he moaned, putting his phone down and grabbing his head while Spar snatched it from the table. “Fucking look, I don’t care. It’s like Shank said, we needed to do a job and it’s fucking done.” He stared at the

table, shaking his head and Bacon wiped his mouth just to hide his grin. He wasn't one to gloat over such things with his brothers, but that fuck asked for what he just got.

And he wanted to know what exactly that was. "Can I see?"

Like a death sentence, Spar handed it to Traps next who merely stared with head shaking and raised brows before handing it up to Shank.

Bacon watched his face. His head shook with an ominous doom and Bacon marveled over it. "When it was me possibly getting bologna, it was soooo hilarious. Now it's a fucking funeral in here."

Shank handed Bacon the phone. Wow. He looked at Hurricane. "So, what did *you* do to piss fate off?"

Hurricane leaned back in his chair with a groan, covering his face while Shank headed for the door. "Gumbo's calling and I'm going answer. Let me know when this meeting needs to happen so I can *pencil* it fucking in on my calendar, yeah?"

Bacon watched him walk out then got back to smiling at his angel on the phone. Phelony. Wonder how she pronounced it? Didn't matter. He would likely make up a nickname for her anyway. Maybe...sugar lumps.

Patches stood in the shower with Tegan, letting the hot water and the feel of her in his arms suck away all the fear and panic that had been clutching his bones. How he'd managed to hide it was a mystery. But it helped having Tegan there, even seeing the fear and worry in her eyes. Her need trumped everything, and she had no idea how much her being there meant to him. Even now in the shower, without being aware, she fed him in ways he couldn't explain. A silent communion of two perfect hungers feeding off each other. The feel of her arms pressing into his back, her hands locked onto his shoulders like he was her anchor brought a hum of deep satisfaction that filled his blood and muscles. He stroked her back and head, hyper aware of what existed between them as he felt the water growing cold.

"We better shower before we run out of hot water," he murmured, pressing his face against her head.

She released him and in silent harmony they took turns washing each other. The second rinsing was finished he shut the shower off, and their gazes

locked, cutting loose his hunger. He grabbed her face in his hands and plowed his tongue into her moaning mouth.

She met his hunger with gasps and cries while he navigated them to his room in a reckless series of wall bouncing till he reached his bed. He crawled over her body and succumbed to her clawing fingers and legs wrapping him. He found her hot perfection with his cock and took every cry and sharp gasp she gave with greedy kisses. His mind filled with visions of her holding that sweet baby and his hips moved with a momentum of their own, craving that life with her, with *their* children.

“Forrest!” she cried as his breaths turned ragged and he fucked her with every bit of himself. He buried his mouth on her neck and sucked when his orgasm hit. Harsh groans strained in his chest as she filled his ears with erotic cries as his final thrust melded them together and locked their bodies in ecstasy.

Before he was done emptying each pulsing wave of ecstasy and life into her, she let go a sob and his head jerked up. She caught his face and kissed him as he found his breath. “I love you so much,” she cried right in his mouth.

He gripped her jaw too fucking hard as a feral hunger possessed him. He needed to make her know what that confession meant to him and there were surely no words to express it. He held her arms above her head, hammering the truth into her sweet body so she never wondered or second guessed, holding her gaze, needing to watch it wreck her. “I love you! I love you!” she gasped, bringing him to that pinnacle where animal instincts thrived. He thrashed on her, breaking her wide open and the sight of rapture on her perfect face was food for his desperate soul. Fuck, he’d needed her for so long he realized, filling her again with every bit of himself—past present and even future.

She owned him now.

And he’d never felt safer.

Mia woke the next morning in her mind first. Jericho was pressed against her, and she didn’t move a single muscle as excitement bubbled

through her till she wanted to squeak and squeal. He was so beautiful. His body, his mind, his heart, his stormy blue fierce eyes. Even without examining him closely, she knew the strict muscles hugged every strong bone. She bit her smile at the warm, thick arm covering her. And his *leg* draped over her lower body. The temptation to reach behind her and learn his manhood became such a great temptation. She barely moved her hips, hoping to accidentally run into the answers. She froze as he took in a deep breath and pulled her body right into everything she was dying to know. Oh, he was so big. Oh *God*, and he was so hard. There was no stopping the return push of her hips.

She felt everything go completely stiff on him and then she did too.

The abrupt disconnect of his body brought a physical pain that shocked a gasp right out of her. She'd experienced many discomforts before, but that one was new. But also oddly pleasurable. So many strange and different things he provoked in her.

He left out of the room, and she lay there in the wake of something. Something worrisome. She was bringing problems at every turn. Why did she even go to his room when knowing he didn't want her there? Was she really trying to please him? Thank him? Or was it all for herself?

She drew her knees up to her chest and closed her eyes. When did she begin needing so many things? Why did she think it was something to pursue?

She listened to the sounds beyond the wall, playing a little game of guess what he was doing. Cooking, she realized when the smells reached her. Something loosened in her stomach. He was still feeding her food. That was a good sign.

She sat up in his bed and gazed at all the gun themed décor. Bullet shell artwork, paintings, and even sculptures. The actual guns in special looking holders implied importance of some kind. Was this why he was called Bullets? Because of his love for guns?

She made her way to her room and dug through the selection of clothes, remembering the sky-blue dress she'd seen with the tiny yellow flowers. Would match her eyes, maybe. She was called a blue-eyed demon and often wondered what sort of blue a demon's eyes were.

She touched her face after putting the new clothes on, wondering again over what he was seeing. And how were her injuries? The swelling felt

a lot better. She looked around the room, mentally arranging it in various, different ways. She did a lot of things mentally back home. She often rearranged their community this way. She could fix things to make something easier that way. Or prettier. She needed to stick to that and not touch another thing in his home other than to clean a thing while leaving it right in its place.

She stroked her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes to engage her mind mirror. She realized she didn't really know how well that mirror worked, but it was all she had. She practiced on the hair of the children and some of the nicer women when they asked, so she was good at it. She'd always made a point to close her eyes and teach her fingers what a proper hairdo felt like so she could copy it on herself. But...she didn't really need a hair-do now. The village required her to keep it tied up and hidden and she wasn't in the village anymore. She liked very much the idea of wearing her hair down.

Braving through her fears, she stood and looked down at herself, hoping she looked as pretty as she felt. She'd know maybe when she looked at her Mirror Man. She smiled at the idea of a human for a mirror. But he was. At least for some things.

Bullets sensed her behind him before turning and his plan to act normal was scattershot by the memory of her body against his. All night. Then he'd nearly ground his cock into her soft ass. Fuck, he needed to keep a lot of space between his dick and her since it only gave a fuck about everything her.

"Morning," he said, turning with her plate of food and setting it on the table. "We survived the storm." And not just the hurricane.

"Morning Jericho," she said softly as he poured her a glass of orange juice.

Did he just fall in love with his own stupid fucking name?

"You finally get to sleep?" He sat at the table, determined to be a man, and have a normal breakfast with a woman that desperately needed civilized people in her life. Then he looked at her. He couldn't believe how fucking *beautiful* she was.

"I did. Thank you," she said, picking up her fork and smiling at the

food. “You always cook for women?”

The immediate regret on her brow held him to the big-boy flame. “Never,” he said, always wanting to be honest with her. “You’re the first woman I’ve cooked for since... well, ever.”

The smile this brought to her face made it worth whatever he’d just sacrificed to the Mia fire. “I can get used to this. Not that I want to. I mean I do, but not with you.” Her struggles tripled with that. “I do want to with you, but I know you don’t want to.”

“I’m celibate,” he informed, immediately enraging his cock. “Have been for years.”

“Celibate?” she asked, taking a bite of the eggs.

“When a man has no relations with a woman. Of any kind.”

She chewed her food, and he got caught up in her crystal blue gaze. “Any kind of woman?” she wondered.

“Any kind of relations.”

She paused chewing for a second then lowered her eyes to her plate. “You have never been with a woman in any sexual way?”

Always so blunt. “A very long time ago, yes. A few times.” As in three to fifty.

“Why are you celibate for so long?”

“I took a vow when I became the leader of this Hatch. Right after the Noctambule war.”

“What is this war?”

He shook his head. “You wouldn’t know of it.” *Because your bone headed leaders refused to help.*

“Being celibate helps you be a better leader?”

“Well, *I* thought it did.”

“A woman can be a valuable help even to a warrior.”

“Right,” he muttered, shoving half his biscuit in his mouth. “You’re not alone on that opinion, seems.”

“You said you are a leader of *this* Hatch. Are there others?”

He nodded. “Eleven others.”

“And they have leaders like you?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, getting busy on his breakfast sausage next.

“Are they all good men like you?”

He flicked his eyes at her and nodded. “I think they are, yeah.” He

wondered then. “You mentioned your mother being from another clan. Where is that clan?”

“Mmmm, this is very good,” she said after biting into her biscuit. “Not so far, I think?”

“You think? You’ve never been?”

She shook her head. “They do not...approve of my clan.”

He set his fork down, curious. “Why?”

“There is a...blood feud this is called?” She glanced up at him. “When family fights over a thing. Over my mother. While married to their Chieftain, she fell in love with his brother and left that clan to go be with mine. They say because of her sin of vanity, she cursed both clans.”

He stared at her, shaking his head in disgust. “What she do, tie him up and force him to marry her?”

She stared back at him and smiled. “No.”

“Then why am I just hearing *she* in the guilty party, what about him, the big Chief, he’s gonna blame a woman for not being able to keep his dick in?” He closed his eyes and lowered his head. “Sorry, I shouldn’t talk that way around you. But I’m not sorry for thinking it.”

“I’m not sorry you think it or say it. I’m happy to hear somebody say what is in my own head about it. If a woman is so strong over the Chieftain, maybe she should be Chieftain?”

“Very good point, Mia.” He finished off his second sausage, eyeing her. “I’m going to be contacting that other clan to see what I can learn. You wanna come?” At seeing her instant fear, he said, “You don’t have to. Just thought you might want to see them. Maybe your clan *lied* to you.” He glanced at her. “Ever think of that?” Because he sure had.

She nodded at her plate, slowly stirring the food. “I have. And...what if they did lie?”

“Then you’d have your mother’s family to protect you.”

“Why can’t I...just...live alone,” she whispered. “Away from everybody?” She took a drink from her glass and set it down, now looking at him.

“You can do anything you damn well please,” he assured. “Live alone, live in a tree. Move to the city. After your *spouse* goes to court here, you’ll be free.”

“What about what my clan says?”

“Doesn’t matter what they say. They don’t have jurisdiction here.”

“What if they want to fight?” she wondered, alarmed.

“Then we’ll damn well fight,” he said, insta-raged. “What’s the problem?” he needed to know.

“I...don’t want fighting. People... get hurt.”

“Exactly right they do. As they *should*.”

“Not always the bad people get hurt.”

Her direct gaze felt aimed at his cock. Then her meaning spread to other dark, cold places inside him. She feared for him.

He stood with his plate and went to the sink. “There could be other storms,” he muttered, turning on the water. “But you need to know you can’t sleep in my bed ever again. I’m celibate,” he reminded firmly. She didn’t need to know that wasn’t a thing anymore. It was where she was concerned.

He’d go find her other clan and see what was what. Knowing there was a blood feud was very promising. He needed plenty of dirt on them in case the Auditors decided to rule unexpectedly in the wrong way. Marriage laws were especially particular with the *let no man fuck with what God joined* facet. And with their culture being different, that could also work against him. He needed plenty of nails for this coffin. But it would only take one to bury him.

Seer again looked up into the early morning sky, eyeing the flock of bats that seemed to be following them. He was still waiting to learn why he asked Nitro along to begin with. He was in one of the visions he’d had. So, it seemed right. But something was off with him. Ever since they picked him up at the agreed rendezvous, he’d sensed it. He’d have to see what he could see before they did anything. They were stopping two-hundred yards before the target. He’d do it then and there.

Turned out this place was sixty miles south of their bayou. Thanks to Bart, he narrowed down what places it could be, going off the details he’d seen in the vision. A pier. A bayou. An Acadian style house—story and a half. Very old. And a huge oak tree in the yard facing the bayou. Seer was thinking Bart must have some kind of gift when the first image he sent was the exact place he’d seen. Then he learned it was one of Beth’s father’s real

estate pieces which opened up another can of *fuck*. He hadn't told Eveque yet and wasn't looking forward to it. They needed to get this sonofabitch and put an end to him and his evil lineage. He was surely the head of one of their snakes.

Lesion slowed and directed their little boat into a cove, indicating they'd reached the two-hundred-yard landing point. Nitro stood and hopped onto land, catching the rope Pier tossed him. They all climbed out and hauled the boat onto ground.

"Will be that way," Lesion whispered, pointing and looking at his phone. He showed them the blueprint of the home on his screen. "This is the side we'll be coming up on. This is where the cellar is, the room you saw the woman and the boy in."

"She knows we're coming," Pier whispered, sounding like he'd wondered about it and now knew.

"That means she's hiding with him," Seer said. "That's what I sensed in the visions."

"So, what about Lazarus?" Lesion asked.

"You and Pier get the woman and Raphael while Nitro and I take care of him," Seer said.

"Before we do anything," Pier said, "we're learning what we're walking in on. Agreed?"

"Agreed," they all said.

Seer looked at Nitro now. "Not sure why you're here, Mon Frier, only that you're supposed to be. But I need to see you before we do this."

"See me?"

Seer held out his hand for a shake and Nitro gave it without hesitation. The connection of their hands felt like a snake bite. Seer gripped him hard as pain and heat travelled up his arm and spread through his body while his mind filled up with nothing but blood and the screech of bats till he was in a prison of pain.

His air blasted from his lungs when he forced a disconnect and stumbled back.

"What the hell was that?" Pier demanded, holding his hands between both of them. Seer realized he hadn't broken the connection, his Pier had.

Seer fought to catch his breath while shaking his head, eyeing Nitro before whispering, "I have no idea."

“What did you see?” Nitro wondered.

Seer held his gaze. “Blood. Just...blood. What did you feel when I touched you?”

He shook his head. “I...think I remembered...pieces of something I forgot.”

“Like?” Pier demanded him.

“I thought...I dreamed it.”

“Dreamed what?” Seer said.

“Going to Felix’s place last night.”

“In the hurricane?” Lesion wondered.

“I intended to go and check on the birds and...find the moles.”

“Alone?” Lesion demanded, pissed.

“No,” he muttered. “I knew they would come with me.”

“Who?”

“My Generals.”

“The bats?” Lesion whispered.

Nitro appeared confused. “I dreamed I made it there, and they greeted me like...children greeting their mother. I took a shower. And after, they flocked on me like a glove. Licked me dry, even.” He turned and rubbed a hand over his head.

“Then what?” Seer prompted.

“Then I went upstairs and...” He suddenly looked at Seer then Lesion. “I remember them...all biting me. And I passed out.”

“They attacked?” Lesion asked, astonished.

He shook his head slowly. “Yes but... it was more like...when I bite Felix. During...”

“Mating?” Lesion whispered quietly.

He nodded. Slowly.

“Holy shit,” Lesion muttered. “You’re saying it was the same as when you bite her?”

“Yes,” he said, realizing.

“And you passed out?”

“I...thought I did. But then...I woke up in bed with Felix.”

“When you bite Felix, it heals her,” Lesion said. “I need to know what happens when they bite you the same way.”

Nitro suddenly looked at Seer. “Are you sure all you saw was blood?”

He nodded. "But it was...*wicked* blood."

Lesion answered his phone. "Eveque. Yeah, we made it to the rendezvous." He looked at Nitro. "No, we have him. He's here." He paced two steps and stopped. "What?" They all watched Lesion who finally turned and looked at Nitro. "Okay. I will. Yes, we'll call you as soon as we do." He hung up with an astonished breath. "They found the moles. All dead. Looked like they'd been torn apart and eaten by a wild bear."

Seer looked at Nitro who stared in shock. His chest began heaving and he walked in circles before leaning over, holding his knees. "Oh fuck," he gasped, dry heaving for many seconds before vomiting.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Is there any way to call first?” Mia wondered from her seat in front of Jericho, driving the small boat ahead of his small army.

“No. Would rather surprise them,” he said.

There was nothing but wrath etched in every line of his handsome face, and it had her nervous for what might be coming. She loved more than anything how protective he was of her, but she didn’t like him putting himself in harm’s way for it. What if they hurt him seriously? Killed him? They would if they could and maybe they could.

She studied the results of the Hurricane all around them. Like an angry dog took the swamp in its jaws and gave it a vicious shake then spit it out. The water and grounds were littered with fallen branches. Boats overturned, some trees snapped in half, some uprooted. She spotted all sorts of furniture in the woods too.

Jericho put a black rectangle box at his mouth and pressed a button. “38, check on our clean-up crew and have them text me their itinerary for getting shit back in order.”

“You got it, Boss,” the voice said in the box. “Should I send a babysitter for our WB in stocks?”

“That’s a big hell no,” he muttered. “Let him have his beauty rest. He’ll need it.”

Mia wished she understood their code language. WB in stocks. Stocks meant chains. “Who is WB?” she wondered.

He aimed his eyes at her and the storm in the dark blue depths stole her breath. “Means wife-beater.”

She rubbed the chill from her arms, not liking the feeling in her gut. What if her mother’s people hated her too? So much that they tried to take her and return her. “What about...the other husbands?” she wondered, trying to be brave.

His gaze narrowed on her. “What do you mean?”

“Husband’s—”

“*Don’t* call him that.”

His command cut right through her, leaving her mouth open and without words.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “He’s *not* your husband. And as soon as his sins are weighed and judged, you’ll be free of him.”

“But...what about the other three?”

“Other three what?”

She gasped, looking at him. “Husbands,” she whispered. “I don’t know what else to call them, that’s what they call themselves. They are Husband’s brothers and I belong to all of them.”

The look on his face turned deadly and she tried not to fear him, but his fury was too much. She covered her face with her hands. “Don’t look at me like that!”

“Fall back,” Bullets said into the rectangle black box as the boat came to a stop. “Mia...explain to me what you just said. Please.”

She gasped when he gently touched her hands and moved them away from her face. She stared at how he held them in his big hands, like she was something precious or fragile. She wasn’t fragile but she...she wanted to be precious to him.

“Take your time, sweet angel,” he said softly. “You don’t *ever* need to fear me.”

She closed her eyes, feeling his large thumbs stroking over her skin. So unbearably distracting. “I...I have four husbands. The...man you took is surely very hard and cruel, but he isn’t the man who did this to me. That was... Brother Husband the first. Then there’s Brother Husband the second and the third” she gasped, shaking her head, pleading to him with her eyes. “I never wanted them for husbands, Jericho,” she barely got out.

He knelt before her and pulled her against him, pressing her face to his chest. “Shhhh, I got you, angel. I know you never wanted it.”

“I don’t want to go back ever again,” she choked out.

“You’ll never go back,” he swore, petting her head. “Don’t worry about those other husbands.” He moved her before him, his passionate eyes drilling into her mind and chest. “You said they all hurt you the same way?”

She swallowed down the lump of fear and nodded, knowing that

answer with certainty.

He held her head in both his large strong hands and pulled her to him. She gasped at feeling his lips pressing against her forehead. "I'll take care of everything. I promise you."

"What if they try to stop you and take me? What if my mother's people hate me more than my other clan and try to take me from you!" She couldn't stop her sobs now and he wiped the tears as they fell.

"No, no, no, I'm bringing you home, I'm bringing you home."

"Home?" she gasped, terrified.

"My home, angel." His strong arms went around her, and he pressed her against him. "My home is *your* home for now, for as long as you want, okay?"

She swallowed, nodding and catching her breath. "I won't ever touch *any* of your things ever again," she swore, a sob bursting out. "I'm sorry about the baby socks," she wailed, holding him tight.

"You can touch *anything* you want," he whispered so hot in her ear as he pet her back and head.

She'd never felt anything so amazing in all her life. "You're taking me back now? To your home?"

"Yes, I'm taking you back right now. To your home and mine. I'm sorry I scared you, okay? Nobody will ever take you from me."

"Keep the men on the cleanup while I deal with something," Bullets told 38 when they met back at his place. "You stay here with her. I need to go see Eveque. No, I'll call him," he decided. "He may want to call a meeting for this one. Do *not* let her out of your sight for *anything*."

"You got it, Boss."

Bullets had to pace outside the cell of the WB so he didn't do anything stupid. Bad enough he'd likely incur penalties for the judgment he'd already used. He was happy to take it, but he couldn't afford it to cost *her* in any way. Hearing exactly *how* he'd shared her was somehow worse than what he'd originally thought. Problem was, if it was only morally illegal according to the Bishops' codes, the fucks could possibly request exemption

in this case since the marriage was already official. He couldn't let that happen.

Five minutes of stalking the entire length of the building, he decided he'd better call Eveque first. His wrath was on a hair trigger with instant death lacing the bullets.

He went a short distance into the forest and dialed him.

"Bullets, you alive?" Eveque said upon answer.

"Yeah, just minor mess on my end. Got the crews cleaning now."

"Same here. But we had quite a discovery this morning when we went for our moles."

"What's that?" Bullets wondered, pausing his steps.

"When we got to the location, we found all of them mutilated in such a way that was humanly impossible.

"What the fuck? What do you think happened?"

"I have no idea. All I know is *something* got to them before we did."

"Their own?"

"Not fucking sure."

Bullets shook his head, baffled.

"The only other possibility is Nitro."

"Nitro?"

"When he's taken by whatever the fuck gets a hold of him, it's brutal. Like a wild animal."

"Holy shit," Bullets said. He knew shit had gone wrong with that bat mess but hadn't realized *how* wrong. "Is he okay?"

"He seems to be. I mean...who fucking knows what's really happening with him. I'm definitely worried. I put him in God's hand so I don't drive myself crazy. What about you? How'd your end of things go?"

"Without a hitch at first."

"Tell me," he said, his voice going hard.

Bullets had to take a breath as rage pistol whipped all the words around on his tongue.

"Fuck, what happened?" Eveque demanded.

"We got the girl and the wife-beater. He's in a cell here."

"Alive?"

"Yes."

A brief pause then, "So, what's all that *oh shit* in your tone, Jericho?"

“He whored her to other husbands,” he blurted first. “She’s never looked in a mirror since she’s born because they’ve got her convinced she’s cursed with a vanity demon, so no looking in the mirror for her. Ever.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, disgusted. “What else.”

“I learned a bit ago that the dude I have here isn’t the one who beat her.”

“Ah fuck.”

“Oh he’s guilty,” he assured. “Turns out he’s *one* of the husband’s she was whored out to, but not another woman’s husband—hers.”

“What?”

“You heard exactly right. She’s married to *four* fucking brothers. And they *all* share in abusing her in every way we can probably imagine.”

Bullets paced in the silence feeling Eveque’s rage. “What did you do?”

“I cut his balls off and I’m about to go feed them to him for a late breakfast.”

“Bullets.”

“I don’t care *what* they do to me Eveque, I’m more worried about how this bullshit will be judged in our court of law. I don’t know what this will end up falling under with them—religion? Culture?”

“Cruel and unusual punishment,” Eveque was sure, but Bullets wasn’t.

“I would fucking hope but I can’t take chances with that.”

“What are you thinking?”

“How to make damn sure she never goes back.”

“Oui. Ideas?”

“Only ones that’d require me to leave the state with her. And that *is* on the table,” he informed, making his intentions clear in the matter.

“So, we need as many reasons to see them hang as we can find.”

He nodded now. “They need to break laws we can without a doubt hold them accountable to.”

“Right. We need to provoke these spineless cocksuckers. I’m still thoroughly pissed how they did us in that war.”

“We all are.”

“Let me make a phone call. See what I can find out, what we can do to bury these bastards.”

“I won’t let them hurt her,” he reminded, his rage returning.

“None of us will. Even if we have to initiate a Delta Dog.”

A tidal wave of relief flooded Bullets at hearing that term. It meant he was one thousand percent on his side to do whatever it took. “Thank you, Eveque.”

“Mon Dieu,” he muttered, sounding mildly worried. “You thank me like a man who put his dick in it.”

“Think again,” Bullets muttered. “But I *will* bite *any* bullet to keep this angel safe.”

“Oui and ahmen.”

“Call me when you know something. Gonna go feed my prisoner then teach this angel how to carry and use a fucking firearm.”

Bishop eyed his Petite, his cock already thick five minutes after fucking her in their very first ever love-shack bed. He’d brought her back to the beginning, to his little home in the swamp where they’d first connected. *Their* home. The light it put on her face had him busting his balls for waiting so long to do it.

“I like you in this kitchen, Ma Petite,” he said as she mumble-guided herself through the prehistoric coffee making as she called it while wearing only his t-shirt and no panties. After many-many requests. And threats.

“I like me in this kitchen too,” she said, smiling over her shoulder. “We should totally live here.”

That’s all it took to turn him into a man he still didn’t quite recognize. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said, unable to keep it in as she proudly made her way over with two cups of coffee. He took his cup, then her wrist and guided her onto his lap. She didn’t fight and he praised her with, “That’s a good girl.” She’d only needed to remind him once that he was failing in his dominant role. He was to be *bossier* with her. “Now, tell me this instant everything in your pretty head.”

She took a huge breath.

“So slow and rebellious,” he teased, making her laugh. She smacked his arm. “Stop making it a joke,” she whined. “It’s supposed to be serious.”

He shook his head, amazed at how twisted her ideas were. “If I want

to joke about it, I'm the boss. Oui? Then you should obediently laugh at my jokes."

"If you were being serious, I would. How am I supposed to teach classes if we can't even do them?"

"Is that what you're doing? Using me to practice?"

"See?" she accused. "You're still joking."

He took her coffee from her hand and set it on the table then wrapped his arms around her till she pressed into his body. "Be still and quiet," he said in her ear. "Let your Eveque enjoy what's his however he likes."

She brought her fingers to the back of his head and raked her nails along his neck then up his scalp, drawing a moan from the darkest depths of him.

"That's it," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Let me have this *heaven*."

"I bet I know something that would make it even better," she whispered-teased.

"A gag?" He held her tighter when she moved. "Ma Petite, be still."

"I was going to turn in your lap," she said, laughter in her voice.

His mind filled with the visual and he released her.

He watched her climb on, his gaze on her hard nipples under his t-shirt.

"Take it off," he said, raising his gaze up to hers.

"First, let me tell you what will make it better," she said, smiling.

"Please," she added with furrowed brows, knowing she was disobeying a direct order.

He slid his jaw to the side and angled his head at her. "If you can tell me in five seconds, Ma Petite."

"I can," she assured as he slid the backs of his hands over her nipples, lowering his gaze to her open shaved pussy.

"We're going to have a baby."

His heart stopped in his chest as he snapped his gaze up.

"It's true," she whispered, smiling.

The tears filling her eyes verified the impossible words as he fought to fix his pulse and breaths.

"You're pregnant?"

"We're pregnant," she gasped, grabbing his face, and kissing him.

“Oh fuck,” he gushed, kissing her back, then holding her face before him. “You’re sure,” he had to ask. “This is not a guess?”

“I bought three tests to be sure. All positive.”

“Who knows?”

“Mah-Mah and now you.”

“Since when?” he asked, as he ate at her lips, starving. “Oh fuck, I’m going to be a father?”

“Savvy will have a baby bishop brother,” she said with smile.

“Or a baby sister,” he gushed, looking down when she grabbed hold of his cock and rubbed it on her clit. He raised his gaze up, desire slamming him at seeing the potent lust in her eyes.

“Will you fuck me now?” she whispered. “Please?”

“Beth,” he breathed, gripping her hips and moving the head of his dick in her opening. Then visions of a baby filled his head and replaced all that heat with another one in his chest. He hugged her to him tightly, gasping for air. “I’m sorry, I can’t...”

She hugged him back, smothering his mouth with smiling kisses.

“You love it more than sex?” she giggled. “I think I like that!”

“We’re having a baby?” he whispered, needing to hear the words out loud.

She laughed and nodded. “A June baby.”

“June,” he whispered, holding her face and kissing her softly. “My beautiful Belle Eveque. I love you so fucking much.”

Mia felt like an odd picture that had no suitable place to hang on the wall. She needed things to do. Work. Useful work. She was strong, she could be of some kind of help, not just a problem that needed solving or a weak woman needing to be watched or guarded. He was too important to his clan to need to worry about her. She wasn’t a fighter, but she’d never really had reason to fight before.

She would need to learn things. More than just female duty things. She had few skills, really. Cleaning and cooking. Knitting. Maybe she could knit him something useful. She didn’t have any thread. She could make him a

pouch for his bullets. Oh. Or a manhood sheath. She'd made some for her husbands. They laughed like it was stupid but wore them in the winter.

Jericho would never laugh at her.

The door opened and she slammed the fridge door shut. "Jericho," she said, surprised to see him so soon. "I was...thinking to cook."

He stopped at the table, his angry gaze heavy and thick on her. "You hungry?"

Her pulse leapt at his hard, accusing tone. She shook her head. "Not really."

"You *sure*?" he demanded.

"I...I'm used to going without breakfast."

Mercies, her answer made him madder.

"But I can eat if you like."

"I want you to eat if *you like*, Mia."

Right. He wanted to protect her and be nice to her. She needed to remember that. But he seemed to need something else. "It can wait if you need me to help. With the hurricane clean-up," she remembered suddenly. "I'm strong, I can help with many things."

"We have *men* for that," he said, his tone still biting.

She nodded. "I can do other things. I can cook and clean. As you know. And knit," she added, trying not to gasp out her words. "Winter is coming and I'm very good at knitting cock-socks. I can make those for all the men in your clan."

"What?"

Oh no, now he was furious. "Uh...a sock for..."

"I *heard that*," he said, disgust filling his face. "Is that what they made you do there? Sew fucking socks for all the cocks?" He lowered his head and spoke that other language, the words grinding out with fury.

"I'm sorry, I don't...need to make them." She remembered how different his culture was. "Is this... against your culture?"

His breathtaking blue eyes pounded right into hers. "Fucking *right* it's against our culture. You need to understand one thing," he said, gripping the top of the chair before him. "In our swamp, the men are just like our *God*. Possessive and *jealous*."

She swallowed at the fierce set of his jaw and the boiling hot power in his words.

“We don’t *share* our women with other men. *Ever*. You don’t look at another man’s *penis*. *Ever*. You don’t touch another man’s *penis*. *Ever*,” he said, his voice getting harder with each command while she nodded a lot to show she completely understood.

“I like this custom,” she gasped, swallowing. “I will never touch another man’s penis or look at it. *Ever*. Except...” His fury darkened right on her, and she couldn’t breathe. Or think.

“Except *nothing*,” he clarified for her.

She nodded again. “Never. *Ever*.” She wanted to say except her husband, but she realized he would not understand she meant her new husband. Then she wondered very carefully, “May I marry again?”

His face became a different mask, one of confusion and rage. “Do you *want to?*”

The disgust and anger in his voice had her puzzled. “Sh-should I?”

He lowered his head again, shaking it and speaking that language, only it didn’t sound as fierce. He looked right at her. “*You* should decide what *you* want. Nobody else. Not me, not any other *man*, not any *woman*. You. Mia decides what *she* wants. If you never want to marry again—which I would *surely fucking* understand—” he added, again lowering his shaking head. “I’m sorry I’m...using so many ugly words with you, they are *not* aimed at you.” He looked at her again. “I’m here to make sure you never live in that kind of life again.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I...I know this. And thank you.”

His blue eyes suddenly softened a little while appearing suspicious. “*Do you want to marry again?*”

The question set her heart trembling for fear of his reaction to her answer.

“Tell me the truth and don’t ever feel like you need to hide what *you want* from me.”

“I...do want to marry again. But...I want to marry the man...*I* want to be with. The man that makes me feel safe and...pretty and causes my blood to...hum and sing and even dance in my veins.”

She had more to say but his face was turning again. She didn’t think any way he fixed it would ever be ugly, just a different shade of beautiful. Right now, he was...disgustedly beautiful.

“What’s funny?” he wondered, making her realize she’d let her smile

out.

“I...like all the faces you have. Always like a storm. Sometimes quiet but other times very fierce and terrifying while not even realizing it.” She giggled at the look he now wore. “Your storm is...like a pouting child sometimes. It’s very...cute,” she decided was safe to say.

“I have a feeling the people in your *dumb* clan lied about the people in your mother’s clan. I also have a feeling there are plenty of...*worthy* Viking men that would be fucking *honored* to be your husband.” He pulled his eyes away from her then snapped them back like a hot whip. “But I’ll need to meet him and make *damn* sure of that.”

Her heart beat so hard inside her chest at hearing and seeing another expression of his beauty. His rage beauty might be her favorite. Followed by what she saw right then. His *jealous* beauty. He did not want her for a wife, but his mirror just said he did not want her to be another man’s wife. *Ever*. “Okay,” she said, wanting him to know she would always do anything and everything he wanted. Except marry another. There could never be another to make her feel all that she did for the very first time in her life. He owned that part of her now. And she would always compare every man to him even if she tried not to, and they would all come up terribly wanting, this she knew without a single doubt.

“Well...if you’re not going to eat, I need to teach you how to defend yourself. I take it you never held a gun before?”

“No,” she said, the idea he’d teach her such a thing filling her with... alarm.

“You need to learn. Once you do, I don’t want you going anywhere without a weapon, understand?”

“You...want me to have a *gun* weapon?”

“Yes. A gun weapon. Later, I’ll get Shank to teach you how to use a knife.”

“I can use a knife.”

“To kill?” he asked, making her stomach tense.

“For...hunting.”

“You need to know how to kill a *man* if ever you need to protect yourself. They’re stronger than you. What’s funny?”

She lowered her head to hide the smile, unable to remove it. “Sorry, I...think it’s...” Funny was not the right word. “It makes me happy that you

care.”

He gave a sharp snoring noise, and she looked up, finding him with his disgust beauty. “It’s called common fucking decency. And it’s not the *least* funny that you don’t know a *fucking* thing about that.” He followed with his fierce foreign tongue as he turned. She watched him go into the hall and made her way to see what he was doing. In the room she slept in, she saw him handling a small firearm then he grabbed a box of something and walked out. She made plenty of room for his purposed gait now heading to the front door. “Follow me.”

She quickly did, biting on her secret smile as she went. Beautiful Jericho Flint. I see you. Standing there in your mirror. Showing me what you can’t hide and yet don’t see. But I see it. I see it and it steals the words from my mind and the breath from my lungs. I see how much you like me. Even while not wanting me. Such a strange combination. She’d never seen it. Except with....siblings maybe.

CHAPTER SIX

Four men were all they could see at the home. Two outside, two inside. And Lazarus, still unaccounted for. It was early morning still but the longer they waited, the riskier it got. They decided to let Pier and Lesion get the woman and Raphael before going for the head of the snake. If she were hiding with him, then leading them quietly out needed to happen first, get them to the boat while Seer and Nitro finished.

Seer's pulse skyrocketed at seeing Pier and Lesion making their way with the woman and boy into the forest at the side of the house. He swung the rifle's scope to the windows, searching for signs of threat, his heart thumping in his ears.

They ran quickly to the side of the porch and Seer set the rifle down, getting his knives out as his blood thickened with every dread and premonition he'd had about this very event.

He grabbed Nitro's shoulder, and he turned, his two colored eyes sharp. "Something's coming," Seer said, needing him to know. "But no matter what happens, we kill the head of this snake. Understood?"

He nodded and Seer eyed the wild look in his eyes right as he became aware of the growing noise of bats above them.

"Follow me in," Nitro ordered quietly. "Stay right behind me."

"In and out," Seer whispered. "Nothing poetic."

"One minute." His chest heaved as he hopped onto the porch, remaining crouched. Seer followed him till they both stood on either side of the door.

Nitro nodded at him, his Glock 19 with silencer ready as he carefully tried the door handle.

He nodded then slowly opened it and stepped in. The immediate sound of silent bullets exiting his weapon followed as Seer stayed behind him. He eyed the two bodies with clean red holes in the center of their heads

while they crept quickly toward the kitchen.

Two more quiet shots in the entryway then return fire rang out. Nitro's body flew back into Seer, jolting three times. Seer grabbed him and shoved him aside, facing the head of the snake and the barrel of his gun right as he threw both knives. He locked gazes with the demon before the man looked down at the two blades embedded to the hilt in his chest. His gun fell from his hand as he collapsed to his knees.

A wave of dizzy hit Seer and he found Nitro climbing to his feet, blood covering the entire front of his white t-shirt. Panic filled Seer as he stared. No. No, not him, not Lukas.

Nitro grabbed Seer's shoulders, his mouth moving but only producing an echo of words. Seer's knees hit the floor and he looked down, finding his own chest full of blood. Confusion swam alongside the vision of Nitro's face now inches in front of him as he lifted Seer in his arms. Dark sparks filled his eyes as his strength left him and his head fell back.

He blinked, staring at the pink streaks kissing the morning sky above with the promise of a new day. New beginnings.

"Help me!"

The terror in Nitro's plea tugged something in Seer as the face of his Pier appeared above him next, terror filling his wide eyes. He fought to speak but he couldn't get enough air. He couldn't breathe. Something clamped his chest tightly and crushed down on his bones.

Seer's hearing suddenly returned to him, right as his Pier yelled the words, "He's dying!"

That's what this feeling was. Death.

Lesion's face appeared next, his eyes dark and wild as he ripped open Seer's shirt. Seer fought to keep his eyes open as Lesion turned and yelled, "Nitro!"

The screech of bats filled his head just like in the vision he'd had when seeing Lukas. Those two colored eyes were before him now, a stark contrast to the black swarming in the sky just above.

Nitro grabbed hold of Seer's shoulders and pulled him up, holding him against his chest as he struggled to get each breath.

"Hurry!" Lesion yelled.

Pain hit Seer's shoulder like a viper strike and his mouth shot open. Fire raced through his mind and blood alongside the crushing agony in his

lungs and chest. Another bite hit his other shoulder. Then another. And another. And another.

Nitro's face filled his vision again, mouth dripping with blood, terror in his wide eyes as Seer watched the black sparks shoot across his vision faster. He reached out for them with his mind and suddenly saw Beth smiling, sitting in the lap of Eveque. She'd just told him something that made him very happy.

She suddenly looked over her shoulder at him. Her smile slowly melted away and her face twisted with anguish, her hand reaching out for him. He fought to reach back, but she was too far. Getting farther.

"Come back!" she screamed in his ear. "Come back Samuel!" she sobbed.

Air filled his lungs, and he sucked it down, the agony returning to his chest.

"Oh God, it *worked!*" his Pier cried.

"We need to get these bullets out of him," Lesion said. "Call Patches and tell him we're on the way to him."

"Nitro," Seer gasped, fighting for air.

"Don't talk," Nitro begged, his anguished, blood-smeared face before him again.

"You were shot..."

"The bullets went right through me," he whispered. "You caught them with your fucking chest."

The regret in his voice brought more agony. "Cherie. Her son..."

"He's here. We have him. And the woman."

He realized his head was in his Pier's lap. "Ma Pier," he whispered, struggling to breathe. "Don't cry."

His father let out a sob, stroking his face. "You fucking died on me. But she called you back."

Beth. How did he know that? "She did," Seer whispered, feeling his chest getting hotter. "It burns," he said, even as his breaths passed easier in his lungs.

"How do you feel?" Lesion asked.

His eyes closed as the heat moved slowly to the rest of his body. "Like...I might not die."

Nitro suddenly grabbed his hand and pressed it to his lowered

forehead with a gasp and cry. “Thank you, God. Thank you.”
Lesion stared then whispered, astonished. “It worked.”

As Bullets led Mia to the closest shooting range, he made a mental list of *exactly* what kind of husband she deserved along with a list of ways to kill any man who violated that. His mind conjured up her sweet face while measuring dicks and fitting all the men with *cock socks*. Fucking *sick fucks*. He forced himself to slow down so she didn’t have to run to keep up with his furious pace. He’d *immensely* enjoyed feeding his prisoner his sins, but it only added more fuel to his rage. And that felt endless. Abysmally deep.

At the range, he turned to her and pulled out the small pistol. “This is called a Glock 42. It’s small, light, and easy to use. It doesn’t have any bullets in it.” He slid the cover back over the bullet chamber and showered her. “Bullet loads here.” He pulled out the magazine. “This is called a magazine, and it holds your bullets and loads them into that chamber.” He demonstrated, slamming the magazine in place. “If I pull this back, it loads a bullet into the chamber.” He performed the move, letting her see it move into place. “This is called the trigger. If I press it, it will send that bullet shooting out of the barrel and into whatever I’m aiming it at. If you know your life is in danger, you aim for the kill shot. That means putting a bullet where they can’t hurt you ever again because they’ll be dead. You understand?” he asked, forcing his voice softer at seeing the distress on her angelic face even as she nodded bravely.

“Stand there while I show you. Then I’ll let you try.”

She got exactly where he told her, and then remembered. “Cover your ears, it’s loud.”

He eyed her, dumbstruck by her beauty while standing there with her hands over her ears, perfect face braced for impact.

He faced forward. “I’m going to fire it now.” He unloaded all the bullets in the chamber one after another then looked at her. “If you continue pressing the trigger, it will shoot till there are no more bullets.”

She nodded a lot, her eyes locked on the gun. Seeing her fear added to his rage. That he had to subject this angel to such a thing as killing another

human made him hunger to annihilate the ones who brought such an evil thing to her pure, sweet as fuck spirit.

“Come here,” he said as soft as he could while removing the empty magazine and pocketing it. “Stand here.”

He got right behind her and shadowed her body with his. “Grab it just like this in your...what hand do you write with?”

“Write?”

Insta-fury hardened every muscle at her worried tone and that they’d never taught her something so basic. “The hand you eat with, angel,” he said, careful to keep his voice soft so she didn’t get embarrassed.

She held her left hand up and he carefully placed the gun in it and held her hand with his then found her right hand and raised it, showing her where to hold it. “You feel it?”

“Feel what?” she gasped.

“The weapon. Feel it in your hands. It needs to become like any other tool to you. Squeeze it. There are no more bullets, so don’t worry, it won’t fire.” He moved so his chest was against her back and closed his arms till they were like a glove over hers. A tremble vibrated through her entire frame, and he angled his mouth at her ear. “Don’t be afraid. I got you.” He slid his finger over her pointer one and directed it to the trigger. “Feel it?”

“Yes,” she said, her breaths shaking.

“I’m going to put another magazine in the gun,” he said next to her ear. “The thing that holds the bullets?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “Don’t let me go!”

“Just my left hand,” he assured, retrieving the spare clip from his back pocket. “You do it,” he said, holding up the magazine. “Take it. Use your right hand for this part. Your left is the hand you hold and aim with. Load it with your right.”

Her breath came faster as she took the magazine, and he guided her hand to the bottom of the gun.

“Slide it in like this.” He nodded as she did it. “Very good, keep going till it doesn’t go anymore.”

“It’s...all the way.”

“Now give it a push till you hear it lock into place. Keep your fingers away from the trigger at all times till you’re ready to make a shot.”

“Okay.” She pushed the clip and gasped at the click.

“You heard it?”

“I did! I heard it click!”

“That means it’s locked into place. Now, you’re going to bring your hand here again.” He moved it and placed it on the gun. “You see that paper in front of you? With the person drawn on it?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I have to shoot it?”

His guts tightened at the terror in her shaking voice. “Yes, angel. You *have* to shoot it.”

“It’s just...a paper.”

“It’s just a paper, that’s right. And I’m right here. You feel me?” Fuck, he sure felt *her*. With every second he hugged her body, his hunger for all the wrong things mounted like a storm.

“I feel you,” she gasped, nodding. “So much.”

Oh fuck, this was going south fast. “Put your right hand on the top like this.”

She did and he covered her hand with his.

“We’re going to slide it back just like you saw me do.” After he did that, he said, “Now...put your hand back here.” He moved it back, trying to hurry while not rushing. “Finger on the trigger now. Left one.”

“We’re doing it now?”

“Yes, we’re doing it now.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” she hurried, breathless. He held both her hands tight, and she pulled the trigger faster than he expected, her scream louder than the blast.

“You’re fine!” he said right in her ear.

“Oh GOD I *shot* it!” she gasped.

“Yes, you did. That wasn’t so bad, right?”

Her breath came quickly. “It...it was terrible!” she confessed, making him chuckle at her honesty.

“But you did it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, you did. Now, I need you to do it again. Can you do that for me, angel?”

She shot again with another scream, maybe louder than the first.

“Why are you laughing? Am I doing it wrong?”

“No, you did perfect. Now I just need you to aim for the face on the

paper. Can you do that?”

“Yes!” she said between five breaths. Another shot with another ear-piercing scream and then, “Did I get it?”

“Almost,” he said, holding back his laugh now. “Try again. See that little tip at the end of the gun?”

“The...raised part?”

“Yes. Look at your target with that tip. Use it like a second eye.”

“Second eye. Got it.”

She fired and he smiled. “You did it.”

She sucked in a huge breath. “I did it!”

“And you got him right between the eyes. Can you do that again?”

“I will *try!*”

Fuck, she was too much for his newly awakened hunger. Everything about her screamed *touch me. Love me. Adore me.* And fuck, he craved to do all three without ever stopping.

“Last shot then we’ll take a break.” Wow, he was *this* pathetic.

She again hit the target squarely and gave a huge laugh. He removed her hands from the firearm, and she jumped up and down, pointing at the target. “I hit it again!”

“You did. Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Her pretty eyes got huge on him. “Not at all! I was so scared for nothing!” She lunged and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you!”

He let her as he slid the firearm in his waist band while his brain captured the feel and shape of her breasts against him. She pulled back and pressed her lips on his then stepped away, lowering a shy smile.

Holy fuck. He stared at the pink in her cheeks while *don’t ever do that again* refused to leave his tongue.

“Tusen Takk,” she said, aiming her lit eyes at him. “This is *thank you very much* in my tongue.”

Then he wondered. “You always kiss people who are kind to you?”

She gave a laugh that obliterated his quickly growing rage. “I do not.”

“Because nobody is ever kind to you?” He was having a hard time being pissed while she bloomed like a human rose before him.

She gave a shrug with her hands behind her back. “Only you. But I like that you’re the only person to be kind to me.”

“Why would you like that?” And why would he ask when knowing he

wouldn't like the answer?

"I like that you're the first."

Huh. "Well, I'm sure I won't be the last," he made himself say. "Not all men are evil like your clan men are. I'm sure you'll learn that soon. Like today, hopefully."

Worry froze her pretty face on him. "Today?"

"I want to visit your mother's clan, but don't worry, I'll call first. You won't come if I see they're assholes."

She nodded her lowered head. "I can cook for you?" She aimed her gaze up at him, squinting an eye in the near noon sun.

"I'd like that," he decided to say, seeing she desperately needed something useful to do.

Her face got back to radiant, and he decided right then it was a sin for her to wear any other look. He also considered the very real possibility her mother's clan might have the exact kind of man she deserved. His mind produced an endless line of them, begging for her attention. "You shouldn't kiss people just because they're kind to you."

A shadow passed over her lit face, stealing her smile as she nodded. "Okay."

That included him, he wanted to say. *Especially* him. But she'd ask why, and he didn't have an answer that wasn't a lie.

The kiss was innocent, so why say anything other than to be a dick when she was giving him a gift. A terrible gift to give a man that wasn't your husband, but it was all she knew. He wouldn't regret it. And he surely would never forget it for as long as he lived.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mia was down to pacing. Jericho had been gone for hours. At least it felt like hours. There was a time telling device hanging on his wall. At first, she didn't know how it worked, but after watching the two needles on it move, she figured out the longest one moved like the sun did when it was setting. But she wasn't positive.

Her stomach tensed at recalling his question about the hand she wrote with. She didn't really ever write anything. But she liked to draw things. She knew some of her language's letters but had forgotten many. But the way he said *write with* confused her. Like he expected she should write things. What kind of things did he think she should be writing?

Angel. That's what he'd called her so many times. Goosebumps filled her skin at remembering the feel of him. He'd only had a thin shirt on, and his chest was hot and hard against her back. And his strong arms next to hers made it so very hard to listen to his words and not just stare at the amazing difference between them. Soft and hard. He had lots of hair and she wanted to touch it with her fingers. See if it was hard like him. She liked him hard. And though she'd never ever liked a man's penis, she was very sure she'd love his.

She sat herself in the rocking chair near the door, watching for signs of him through the window. She'd considered Jericho being right about her mother's clan being lied to. She wasn't sure how to even think or feel about it, so she thought of her Mirror Man instead.

She suddenly reached up to her face, touching it. She still hadn't looked in his real mirror. But more than ever she still wanted to know what the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen looked like. Maybe she would ask him to do it with her. Be there to protect her in the looking glass.

She smoothed her hands over the pretty dress, again wanting to go outside and help the small army of men clean up the fallen debris. Where

were all the women? In her clan, the women did all the cleaning. They were all very strong and sturdy and took pride in that. Mia always worked extra hard to make sure she could never be accused of being weak. She lacked in many things, but physical strength and speed wasn't one of them. She was also good with her throwing ax, but she never showed that. She could strike any mark without fail from a great distance. She brought many meals home for her clan with her faithful hunting tool.

She loved hunting more than anything. When her husbands were very mean she would walk and walk in the woods, pretending she was leaving to never return ever again. She wasn't sure what always stopped her. Something in the air, whispering wisdom that she couldn't understand but knew was important. She sucked in a breath as her heart skipped about. Was it because of Jericho? Did the land know she would meet him one day?

She considered her husbands and pressed her hands over the agony it brought to her chest. So cruel. So very mean to her. *Always*. Why did they hate her? It was a puzzle she was always trying to piece together. She was sure one day the answer would come and then she could fix it.

She sucked in a huge, shaky breath and closed her eyes, letting her mind and body *feel her Jericho*. Her tears fell, hot and with so much joy till her body shook with it. She was finally free. And her Jericho would make sure she never went back. He'd always protect her.

Bullets' phone buzzed and he pulled it out, answering it. "Eveque."

"Seer and Nitro were shot while getting the boy and woman. They're in a boat on Bayou Tesh and I just sent a Swamp Dragon to intercept and bring them to Patches. Where are you?"

"I'm headed back to Mia. Just left her mother's clan. What's their status?"

"Nitro took three shots to the chest. They went clean through him and hit Seer who now has the bullets in his fucking chest. He died and... his father had the idea to call Beth and she *called* him back from the fucking grave on the phone."

Every muscle in Bullet's body hardened at hearing the quake in Eveque's deep voice.

“What about Nitro?”

“He’s completely fine, already healing.”

Bullets shook his head. “How?”

“That... *bat* shit! And the reason Seer is currently stable is because Lesion had the idea to have him *bite* Seer.”

Bullets paused in mid pacing. “Bite him?”

“His saliva has the ability to heal when he wants it to. And apparently, he can control that.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m not,” he said, sounding relieved and astonished.

“Will he be okay? Samuel?”

Eveque let go a heavy sigh. “He *has* to be.”

His voice broke, twisting Bullets’ guts. “He will be,” he said, nodding in agreement.

“Tell me some good news on your end, Jericho,” Eveque said tiredly.

“Well, I met her brother. Mia’s. He was ready to take a small army and kill all of them.”

“What stopped him?”

“His father. The clan’s Chieftain.”

“So, he’s her half-brother?”

“Yep. He took another wife when Mia’s mother left. But here’s the jaw dropper. Nobody knew she’d had a baby.”

“Fuck, they didn’t even *know* about her?”

“They did not.”

“These sick fucks,” Eveque swore under his breath.

“Mia’s two years older they’re thinking.”

“She’ll be happy to learn this?” Eveque wondered.

“I sure fucking hope so. They want me to bring her immediately. The whole place was in an uproar when I left. The brother seems like good people.”

“You bringing her?”

“I am. She needs to meet her *real* family.”

“I see,” he said, curious sounding.

Bullets wouldn’t say more because it didn’t matter. She needed to be someplace safe where she could grow up and be a young woman without the pressure of men. He’d see to that much. “If she doesn’t want to stay, I won’t

make her. Told her my home is hers as long as she wants it to be.”

“Ah,” he said, his curiosity louder now.

“I’ll protect her as long as it takes. That’s my job. If she wants to hide out at my place and recover, she’s welcome to.”

“Oui, oui,” he said, lightly.

“When’s the next meeting. I need updates.”

“Check the group chat, I just put some up. If you have questions, ring me or text. Oh, I just remembered. Give Bart a call. He has some info about other Vikings he said you’d be interested in.”

“Will do.”

Bullets hung up and pulled the small boat onto the land behind his home and made his way to the foot path, eyeing his surroundings. She needed self-defense lessons before he turned her loose *anywhere*. Close combat for when or if a human monster got too close. As much as he hated to, he’d need to do that right away then send her off. He stopped to pull his phone out, finding the Twelve chat then the update.

Virtual Meeting tonight at 9:00 PM to discuss all updates.

He shook his head, sliding his phone back in his pocket. Coulda’ just told him that. He found Bart’s number and hit send, wondering what Mia had done while he was gone. He recalled how she’d *uncleaned* everything and the idea made him sick she’d thought she needed to.

“The Bullet Man,” Bart answered.

“Eveque said you had some Viking info for me?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, his voice lowering a notch. “This will actually be information everybody will want to hear. Planned to bring it up at the meeting.”

Bullets walked a ways from the back porch. “What is it?”

“Ever hear of the Creole *Viking Kings*?”

Bullets thought a whole second. “Never. Friend or foe of these fuckheads?” He needed to know what might be headed their way once the shit started hitting the fan.

“No connection whatsoever. That I can *find*,” he added. “Honestly, I’m not even sure if it’s not myth or legend at this point. But if it’s real, they live in the north side of the swamps. Underground.”

“Underground?”

“Yep. That’s how they stay hidden. Supposedly a very secret society.”

“Of Vikings,” he muttered.

“*Creole Viking Kings*. Which from my limited knowledge has more to do with them being all about mixing elite blood lines.”

“For *what*?” he wondered, fucking fed up with the Viking *nonsense*.

“To create elite humans? I mean if I had to guess.”

Bullets wanted to say he *didn't* have to. Least not right in his fucking ear. He realized he was no closer to knowing a damn bit and asked,

“Anything of relevance with these new Royal *Vicki's*?”

“I don't know *what* they know about our blondies, but I can guarantee they *know something* that would be worth knowing. In relation to your prisoner and what manner of judgment you've given.”

He nodded, looking around. “You heard about that.”

“I did. I don't need to say you have the full support of every one of us on that front. Heard he ate balled eggs.”

“He fucking did. Sauteed in the *piss* of his judge.” Bullets nodded at the laugh, letting himself enjoy it too. He glanced over his shoulder. “I gotta go. I met with the Viking girl's mother's clan. They didn't even know she existed. Gonna bring her home to them as soon as I teach her a little self-defense.”

“Good idea. I'll bring anything more I learn to the meeting tonight. Got a couple more phone call leads. Gonna try to learn about our new Viking Kings.”

“Yeah, you do that. Impress me *please*.”

“Do my best. Later Bullets.”

“Later Little Brother.”

He hung up and made his way to the back porch. At the steps, he caught a flash of her sky-blue dress through the window and his pulse became a hammer in every one of his veins. He paused with his hand on the door, closing his eyes and commanding his chemicals back in their fucking cage.

He tried the handle, relieved to find it locked and knocked softly on the glass.

The curtain barely moved aside, revealing a single jeweled eye then her entire smiling face, bringing all those chemicals right back into his blood. It wasn't just the smile, it's why she smiled. She had a seriously bad case of savior syndrome and he needed to be so fucking careful. Being unhealthily

attached to another man, even him, wasn't the kind of new start he was cutting off balls to give her.

His gut tensed as she struggled to unlock the door, bringing another round of *how many basic fucking things does she not know?* Did she live in a fucking tent while everybody else lived like royalty? The door finally jerked open with her happy gasp, and he froze when it looked like she might get physical with him. Then she stepped back and opened the door for him. "Hi Jericho *Flint*."

His dick jerked at hearing his name on her musical voice, mocking his iron resolve. "Hello Mia *Junie*," he returned, getting her stifled giggle. The scent of cooked food drew his gaze to the kitchen. "What smells so good?"

"I cooked!" she announced, hurrying to the oven, and pulling out a plate of food. "I had it warming."

His gaze fell to the gaping top of her dress as she leaned over the table with his food. He forced his eyes to the plate while his mind finished creating the rest of that perfect breast shot. Fucking no bra.

"Sit," she said, pulling his chair out. "Please."

Seeing it meant everything to her, he removed his hat and hung it on the empty chair and sat, not the least hungry with everything going on.

"Not hungry?" he asked when she sat across from him, watching and waiting like he was about to do a magic trick.

"I ate. Taste it," she urged with that pretty smile.

He looked at the food and scooped up a forkful of what looked like a combo of every item in his fridge and took his first bite. "Mmm," he said the second it hit his tastebuds, beyond surprised with the burst of flavor.

"The trick is frying the vegetables in the butter," she whispered, as he made more sounds that brought her joy.

"Wow," he said after the third bite. "I was prepared to bend the truth, but I don't have to. This is amazing."

She gave a big laugh at that. "What does bend the truth mean? Is this the same as lying?" She still smiled, like she was sure it wasn't bad if he was doing it. She'd be right.

"It's when you say something nice while meaning something else. I might have said that you did an amazing job, because you did, no matter what it tastes like. The fact that you went through the trouble to cook for me is what I would be meaning."

“I live here, I eat here. I should cook for you? This is like a payment, but I would do it for free for you. I like to cook.”

“I’m glad. I don’t really care to.”

She sucked in a breath as he took another bite, watching her wide eyes. “And you are so good at it.”

He chuckled at that. “I know how to do one or two things. I’m better with a campfire.” He ate in silence, feeling her eyes all over him. He glanced up, finding her gaze locked on his mouth right as he licked his lips. Her eyes flashed up to his, showing him everything she was thinking and none of it was child-like. Fuck, she was too much.

He forced his mind to other things, particularly bringing up what he’d learned about her family. “I went to your mother’s clan,” he ventured, eating his last bite and holding on to her sudden guarded stare. “Remember what I told you? About them lying to them?”

She gave a small nod.

“They didn’t exactly lie to them, they *never* even told them about you. They had no idea you existed.” The look of shock on her face was a good sign, he thought. He stood and took his plate to the sink then returned and sat, leaning back in the chair, and staring at her lowered head. “You have a brother who wants to meet you,” he said softly. “They all want to meet you. I had to stop your brother from going kill all of them, you know. Your real family love you very much and can’t wait for you to return.”

“Return?” she gasped, looking at him.

He stared back, debating on how to say things in a way that would gain her cooperation. “Here’s the thing, Angel. You’ve lived all your life with...very bad people who treated you like...” The words burned his tongue, and he lowered his head, not wanting his wrath to enter the conversation. He looked at her again. “You were married *too* young, made to do things *nobody* should ever be forced to do. Your real family are thrilled that I found you and want to give you a chance to be a young girl, to do things you’ve never had a chance to do.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need to do girl things, I’m a woman now. I can’t go backwards, Jericho.”

He nodded with that answer. It was true. “Then a life that moves forward in whatever direction that you want.”

“But...you saved me from that life and I... I thought...”

The food in his stomach turned into a brick at her tears. “Mia...” he said softly.

She shook her head suddenly and wiped her face. “It’s okay Jericho. I understand. No, I don’t but...I don’t need to. I’d like to see my new family, of course, it’s right to see them. I don’t want them hating me.”

“They won’t hate you, Angel,” he said quietly.

“I know that,” she said with an empty laugh. “I’m being childish. So, when do we go? I guess I’m ready now if you want to take me.” She hurried out the room while mumbling, “Gonna get my clothes and return these to the nice lady who loaned them to me.”

Fuck. Dread closed Jericho’s eyes at all her fake *joy*.

He made his way to the room, watching her remove clothes from the drawer and set them on the bed. “Those are yours, Mia. Take them with you.”

“Thank you, Jericho, but they’re really not my kind of clothes.” She straightened, her bright blue eyes right on him. “Is... that okay?”

Always worried everything she did was wrong. He hated seeing it. “Yes. Whatever you want. And I...” Jericho, slid his hand over his head, looking at the bed. “I just... wanted you to spend a few days with them. You’re still welcome to return here if you see you don’t want to live there. Just like I said.”

His muscles tensed at the look on her face. She threw the clothes in her hand down and raced toward him.

He caught her in his arms as she hugged him and he was unable to stop from returning it this time. “I thought you were making me leave for good! I don’t want to leave for good, Jericho Flint.”

Fuck, he loved when she called his name that way. “You don’t have to.” He stroked her hair and back while feeling her soft breasts hot against him. “But promise me you will spend a week there at least to connect with your family. Then you can return here if you like. And visit them whenever you want. And if you decide you want a home of your own, I’ll see to it. I want you to experience life without anybody telling you what to do or how to think. You need to be whatever you want to be, go wherever you want to go. But you need time to find out what that is, right?”

She nodded against his chest. “I will do as you ask, Jericho Flint.” She pulled back and looked up at him. “But you must let me give you something. I need to give you this.”

His blood and muscles lurched with all the wrong assumptions. “What is it, Angel?”

“I want you with me when I look into the seeing glass for the first time. I need to do this and remove these fears I feel buried inside me. Do you think this is a wise thing to do?”

His breath raced out, and he stroked the hair along her face. It was the last thing he expected her to say and yet more profound than anything he could have imagined. “I’d be *honored* to stand with you for the first time in the mirror.”

A smile lit her face and he had to still himself against the sudden reflex to kiss her.

“Now?” she wondered, her gaze lowering to his mouth.

His heart raged in his chest. “Now, yes.”

Those soft blue eyes held him like a forbidden embrace. She took his hand, and he closed his fingers around her tiny one, more than curious over the hot thing surging inside him. It had a hunger in it, but also a terrible dread that shook even the muscles lining his bones.

In the bathroom, she spun and faced him when he stepped with her in front of the mirror. He stared at the blond hair flowing in gentle waves down her back and placed a hand on her head. He stood fixated by the mesmerizing sight.

Carefully, he stroked the golden silk as her arms went around him tightly. He wanted to close his eyes and relish in the feel of that, of her clinging to him, needing him, but he couldn’t take his eyes from his hand touching such a beautiful thing. Her body trembled against his as he went on stroking and feeling. He didn’t utter a single word of comfort. He wanted her fear. To feel it in his own body. Feel her need for him. Just once.

He recalled all the men in the clan he was bringing her to. Strong, fierce warriors with noble leaders. He knew in the very bottom of his sick gut that when they saw her, what he was experiencing with her would be over.

He pressed his hand along her back, feeling the shape of her, needing to remember exactly what she looked like. Felt like. Even if he never had her, she was all he’d ever have. His eyes slowly closed as he realized it was his last chance to teach her the most important thing she should never forget.

“Turn, Mia Junie,” he whispered. “Stand with me in the mirror.”

He took hold of her shoulders and helped her turn.

Eyes clenched shut, her breaths blasted out as if the weight of a thousand mountains pressed down on her. And still, there was nothing in the world he'd seen more beautiful. He moved his hand over her neck, barely letting his fingers feel as he traced the slender column. Her gasps strained as he felt the sharp, perfect angles of her jaw before the backs of his fingers etched the silk of her face into every part of him.

He lowered his mouth to her ear where the smell of her stole every noble word from his mind. "Mia," he shuddered, fighting to catch his breath. "I will be in every mirror with you." He raised his gaze to their reflection. "Look at me, Angel."

Her eyes suddenly popped open, and she gasped many times with whimpers and half cries.

He stroked her face with both his hands now, unable to speak words while the powerful moment devoured both of them. Her fingers moved up and trembled on her lips as she felt them, a sob straining out of her followed with more gasps as she uncovered the lies she'd been told. The utter sadness for that broken girl now gripped her face.

He pressed his lips firmly against her silky cheek, locking eyes with those filthy demons still in her gaze. With reverent fingers on her jaw, he captured the lies and fears, placing hot kisses on the tear-soaked skin.

Flames erupted in her eyes and speared him clear through while burning up the panic in her breaths, replacing it with a silent begging for salvation.

He couldn't stop the trail of small kisses he gave, each one reverent as he suckled and tasted his forbidden angel. Her lips parted with another kind of war, and she grabbed the back of his neck tightly. He realized this is what he needed to do. Scar her with a passion she would never forget and always know. The only kind of passion his perfect angel deserved.

"Look at me, Mia," he whispered, his breaths labored as he opened his mouth more with every taste. "You feel that?" He moved his hand slowly into her hair, filling his fingers with the silk before making a slow, gentle fist.

"Yes!" she gasped, his mouth now at the very edge of hers.

He stroked her lips with his fingers, letting it burn him alive. "No man should ever touch you without this fire," he swore, nipping at her mouth. "Let it burn your mind. Your heart." He closed his fingers around her jaw and turned her face, staring deep into her eyes till their breaths clashed, hot and

thick. He lowered his mouth and kissed her. The feel of her *soft* lips under his cruel hunger shredded every bit of control in him.

He put her against the wall and held her there, consuming the silk in his fingers before it melted from his desperate grip. Fuck, not just a kiss. She needed more. So much more. She needed to know the ecstasy of pleasure. With every fiber of his being, he knew she'd never tasted it. It would kill him to give it and kill him not to.

He threw them both in that fire and lowered the top of her dress in one yank. Her hot gasps and her perfect breasts held him spellbound. His big hands covered the full mounds, feeling their tightness and the silky crown topping them. He squeezed and lowered his head, sucking the first one till he created hard jewels of the silk before giving his greedy tongue the job of bringing more of those shocked sounds she made.

Her desperate fingers pulled in his hair, declaring him so fucking right. She'd never felt such a thing. He left her breast and grabbed her jaw, kissing her again, filling her with his boiling lust. "I'm going to suck your pussy, my sweet Angel," he swore right in her mouth. "Fucking hold on to something."

Mia grabbed the only thing she could, his beautiful head. "Jericho!" she gasped in shock as he pushed her leg up and open against the wall. His rough fingers pinned it so tight but the painful bite in her muscle disappeared when his heavenly mouth pressed right on her privates! "Jericho! Oh my... Oh Jericho!"

She dug her fingers in his hair, needing something to clutch as her body came alive and met his greedy *sucking* on the most amazing spot! Oh God, the sounds he made. She was the best thing he'd tasted, she heard and felt it in his eagerness and moans.

"Oh! Yes, oh God, Jericho," she panted, staring at the greedy flick of his tongue on the burning spot. Oh God, it was unbearably hot! Deliciously hot. "Please!" She wanted to beg him to *help her* but that wasn't right. She used her fingers to hold him against her while moving her hips to help him get right on it!

"Your fucking pussy, Mia," he gasped, the sound of hot awe burning

her before he licked and kissed then pressed his mouth hard on her and *sucked!*

“Oh!” she cried too loudly, trembling. “Oh God, yes, yes! Please do it, do it there, like that! Jericho, I’m...”

He gave a hard moan on her, not letting up as her cries grew with the heat. His finger moved in her woman’s opening and pushed inside her. Never in her life had such a thing been done to her. Something huge happened where his mouth was, and violent waves of pleasure stole her breath and shook her very soul and body!

The miraculous experience stole things from her, time and maybe consciousness. It finally released her like a gentle hand, carefully returning her to her body which was now without strength. Jericho caught her as she slid down the wall, wrapping his arms so tightly around her. Oh, the feel of his heart pounding against her breasts. It was another kind of miracle so profound it brought a huge sob.

His breath thickened as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him back so tight, never wanting to let him go. She wanted to tell him so. But he’d just given her something so beautiful and she wouldn’t ruin it with childish begging. She devoured every bit of it, not wasting a single second as he pet and kissed her cheek and forehead while speaking the same words over and over in his foreign tongue. *Ma sucre Mia reve. Ma sucre Mia reve.*

Bullets fought to catch his breath, capturing her hands when they sought to return the favor. “No, no, just you, Angel. That was *all* for you,” he whispered, petting her head and pressing her into his body before he gave her back to the undeserving fucking universe.

“What about you?” Her beg burned him clear to his soul as he shook his head.

“Just my sweet girl.” His breaths finally slowed even as the earth continued to quake beneath him. “Before you go, I want to teach you self-defense. I don’t want any man ever hurting you again, you understand?”

She nodded her head against him, and he knew his denial hurt her. But if she returned what he’d done, he’d never be able to let her go and learn

what her heart had to say. She was a natural giver, a natural angel, and she'd been taken advantage of. She had to fly first before settling on anybody or anything.

He turned and sat against the wall, pulling her in his lap. She snuggled as close as she could, face pressed into his chest with a tight embrace. "I will do as you say, Jericho Flint," she murmured softly. He pressed kisses on the top of her head, closing his eyes at the rush of dread and relief colliding inside him.

"Thank you, Angel. You can always trust me to do what's good for you. You believe that?"

His heart pounded with a fury at her quick firm nods and, "Yes."
Fuck, that was all that mattered, he realized. That she believed him.
She would be free, and he would wait for her to return to him.
And if she never returned, he would *still* wait.
He would *never* stop waiting for her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cherie ran up the steps at Patches hospital, her chest on fire with fear. Her baby was safe at the main house, but she hadn't gone to see him when she learned her Sami....

Another sob gushed from her as she flew into the front doors.

"Miss Cherie," a woman called, hurrying to her. "This way," she urged, taking off across the room.

Cherie raced after her and entered a door leading downstairs, then down several halls. She stopped at a door and whispered, "He's in here, recovering. Dr. Patches removed three bullets from his chest but he's doing *real good*," she nodded, preparing her.

"Thank you," Cherie whispered, wiping her eyes as she opened the door slowly.

Her gasp flew out at the sight of her Sami sleeping in the bed like a beautiful angel. She raced to him and put her lips on his forehead.

"Ma Cherie?" he murmured, his arms slowly raising.

"Now don't move," she wept, covering his face with delicate, careful kisses. "You need to rest. I love you baby, I love you so much," she cried hotly.

"Mmmm," he barely moaned. "There's my healing," he croaked with slurred words. He'd been given something to help him sleep and she was interfering with that. "Raphael."

Her chest got hot and unbearably tight. "I haven't met him yet. I...I wanted to wait for you. I'm scared, Sami. What if he doesn't remember me? What if he looks at me like... a stranger? What if he doesn't...*want* me?" she sobbed.

"Awww, sha, ma sucre Cherie," he murmured, petting her head. "His pure heart will remember. I didn't get to meet him yet. But I saw him. He's a little angel."

“They’re in one of the guest houses at Mah-Mahs, waiting for me. Can I please...wait for you? So we can do it together? Or should I not wait? And just do it alone? Maybe that’s the right thing. Maybe I need to face this my sins alone.”

“No, no, Ma Cherie. You are mine to protect. Ask Patches to bring them here. We will become a family together.”

It took thirty minutes for Bullets to learn that his Mia needed no lessons in self-defense. She was as skilled and fierce as any male warrior he fucking knew.

“What is wrong?” she gasped moving off when she pinned him again.

He sat up and looked at her. “I’m fucking pissed, I’ll be honest.”

“Why?” she worried.

“Not at you, Angel,” he muttered. “That you didn’t know you should have used your skills on those men. That you thought you deserved what you got.” He stood, glaring at her smiling face. “It’s anything but funny to me, Mia. It breaks me to fucking pieces.”

She hopped up and wrapped her tiny strong arms around his neck. He dodged her lips, getting her laughing kisses on his cheeks and chin as he unlatched her hold before he gave in to the desperate need to show her *one* more time what passion looked like.

“Don’t worry, Jericho *Flint*,” she said, his name from those sweet lips giving him a fucking ear-gasm. “I am a quick learner. You have shown me the truth about me and my life, and I will *never* let any man trick me again.” She gave him a breathless smile with her bright eyes before shaking a tiny fist at him. “I have seen the true way of the warrior in my Mirror Man. This will *always* protect me.” She put her fists on her hips and got indignant with all that beauty. “And you should let me *pay* you for this!”

He lowered his grin and shook his head. “Maybe one day, Angel,” he said. “Go fly a little first.”

“I will.” Her gaze softened with a lover’s mischief as she held up a measure with her two fingers. “A *very* little.”

He had to laugh, loving this new spirit in her as well as the amount of time before she’d fly right back to him. “Just want you to stretch those lovely

wings.”

“Five days, Jericho Flint. That’s all you get before I bring my wing-stretching back here.”

His tongue moved in his mouth with the need to kiss her. “Works for me, Ma Mia Junie.”

She smiled and angled her head, curious. “What is this you say to me in your language?”

“When?” he wondered.

“Right after you...sent me to a million other universes in the bathroom.”

Oh fuck. He let out a gasp as his mind filled with those final seconds until he couldn’t breathe much less think. What had he said to her?

“Ma...suck...Mia...something.”

His laugh disrupted the blood flow to his dick. “Ma sucre Mia reve. It means my sweet Mia dream.”

She gasped with an ecstatic smile and laughed. “This is a very good name, I think?”

God, he was *so tempted to hope*. “I surely agree, Ma sucre Mia reve.”

“I’m very nervous, Jericho Flint,” she whispered as they approached the stone wall surrounding their village.

“You don’t have a damn thing to fear,” he assured, letting her clutch his hand tightly mostly so every man that might be watching knew she had a guardian that would kill to protect her. He’d fixed an *I fucking dare you*, on his face, clear and in bold print.

“Guess I should’ve called ahead,” he mumbled as one of the god-like looking warriors approached in native attire which was stormy blue flowing pants and tattoos covering his arms, face, neck and chest. Behind him, a dozen more like him followed. He realized they were all the exact kind of dudes he’d imagined Mia falling madly in love with.

His fingers tightened around her hand as he held the leader’s fierce gaze that hadn’t strayed once from Bullet’s, not until he stopped a few feet before them and regarded Mia with a nod. Then it was right back to Bullet’s with, “Greetings, valiant Bullets. And a profound welcome to you, Mia, long-

lost sister of our esteemed Go-thee Kaj.” This came with all of two-seconds on Mia. “I am Håkon Leifsson,” he announced to Bullets. “Unwavering guardian of this clan and loyal aide to Go-thee Kaj, along with my brothers behind me. Though your arrival comes swiftly to us, it brings with it a cause for great rejoicing and marks a momentous occasion in the annals of our people. As Go-thee Kaj completes his rites in the sacred Veil of Purification, his heart beats with eagerness for the meeting with Mia, a reunion that bridges time and destiny.” He put his hand on his chest and gave a bow. “Your journey here has not merely reunited kin but has also woven a new thread into the fabric of our collective destiny. Let us retire to the grand hall of our forebears, where the flames of the hearth burn bright, and the bonds of fellowship grow strong. Tonight, we revel in the spirit of this reunion, celebrating the paths that have led us to this moment.” He ended with a fist in the air and the group behind him followed suit, all of them shouting, “Skoal!”

Bullets regarded Mia, alarmed at the panic in her expression. “Uh... thank you,” he said, stepping in front of Mia and blocking the wall of men from her view. “We’ll be there shortly,” he said over his shoulder.

“I’ll remain until you are ready and lead you to The Great Hall.”

Bullets nodded, facing Mia. “You okay?”

She shook her head a lot, stepping closer to him.

“I’ll...stay with you till you’re comfortable?”

She clutched his t-shirt and nodded a lot. “Please,” she whispered.

He took her hand again and turned with her. “Lead the way, Hakon.”

As they walked through the gate in the wall, the staring began. Bullets boldly looked at every face and read every expression. As they made their way to the Great Hall, his guts loosened at finding no signs of animosity or judgment. The women were especially welcoming, literally. “Welcome home Mia,” was repeated by nearly each of them. All while the men treated her like she didn’t exist. Kind of odd. He’d surely be inquiring about it to her brother. While he didn’t want these dudes fucking the wrong way with her, he also didn’t want them treating her like she wasn’t worth the time of fucking day to even *look* at.

The Great Hall was a long building made of logs and clay. They entered to the bustle of a large crowd of women moving about with many trays of mostly food, he realized. They were preparing for a feast. It hit him she was the reason, and he lowered his mouth to her ear. “I think this party is

just for you.”

Her gaze snapped up to him, full of surprise and worry. He leaned again and whispered, “What’s that look for?”

She suddenly tugged him toward the exit and once they were out and on the side of the building she let go of many breaths like she’d been holding it all that time.

“Angel, what’s wrong?” he wondered.

She paced before him and shook her head. “There are so many people,” she whispered. “They all look at me and... and...”

“Smile? Like you? I think *love* you,” he corrected.

“Yes!” she gasped with terrified eyes at him. “They don’t know me.”

“You’re not used to all this attention,” he said, getting many vigorous headshakes of agreement.

“Dare I ask if there were no celebrations like this in your clan?”

She eyed him with furrowed brows. “There were. I just...”

“Never attended any? Because you were what? Changing trash? Wiping asses? Measuring cocks?”

She bit her lip and covered her mouth as her laugh erupted. “I only wipe baby’s asses,” she whispered. And measuring for—”

“Don’t say it,” he warned, getting her giggle before looking around. “How long will your brother be is the question. I wanted to talk to him before leaving.”

She snatched his hand in both of hers and he looked down at her face now back to terrified. “Please don’t leave me here Jericho Flint. I will do anything you say, *please*.”

Fuck. He took a deep breath and looked around. “I’ll stay one day with you. Till you get comfortable.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around him and he held his arms up, not wanting to indulge in something he craved, like touching her. He let himself pat her head at least. For her sake. “Thank you, Jericho Flint.”

“Mr. Bullets.”

Jericho turned to find Hakon there.

“Forgive me for my neglect and allow me to show you and Sister Mia to your ges-thus.”

“Ges-thus?”

“This means guest house in your language,” he interpreted easily.

Bullets nodded, glancing at Mia standing just on his left with her head lowered. "Thank you."

The man turned and Mia latched her arm in Bullets', following with him.

The dude stopped before a small looking hut and gestured with an arm. "For Mr. Bullets." He gestured to a second just like it across from his. "Sister Mia." He looked at Bullets. "You are welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Is that...going to be her home?" Bullets wondered.

"Until she determines her footsteps, yes."

Her footsteps. He'd need to verify all these terms with Kaj. If it meant her future, then he agreed to that arrangement. "Thank you Hakon."

The warrior put his palm on his chest with a nod and slight bow. "Go-thee Kaj will be here shortly to accompany you to the Great Hall for the celebration."

"Thank you," he said, watching the warrior walk off without so much as a glance at Mia again. "Weird," he muttered.

"Weird?" she echoed, like the word was foreign.

He regarded her pretty face. "Means strange."

Her smooth brows puckered. "What is strange?"

"That none of the men look at you."

Her eyes widened. "No?"

"No."

"You think...that is strange?"

"I do. You're the most beautiful woman on this planet, they *should* be looking," he informed. "It's strange as fuck that they don't."

He saw her fighting back a smile. "This makes you angry?"

He stepped onto the porch of his gus-thus. "It does."

"Why?"

He opened the door and looked in, finding a single loft bed, a table and two chairs, a sitting chair with a small table and a tiny pot belly stove.

"You *want* them to look at me?"

He glanced down at her. "No," he said. "But they still should look."

He walked into the small room and looked around. "Guess yours is like this one?"

"Yes."

“You have these types at your other clan?”

“Yes.”

He turned, facing her, biting his tongue on questions that would only infuriate him.

“But I slept in a private tent,” she said, torching his short fuse.

“Of course you fucking did.”

She snapped her eyes back on him, and he stared at her lips pressed together and fighting a smile. He realized she loved how much he hated it because it made her feel loved. His stomach loosened a little. She *should* have somebody pissed for her. Besides him. Her brother sure was. He’d have to be the one to replace his wrath. Not fucking possible. But it would have to do.

“Do you think...we can share this one?” she wondered.

His dick jerked so hard he nearly grunted. “No.”

“Why?” she asked, her furrowed brows so fucking innocent.

“Because...I’m sure it’s not acceptable. Men don’t just sleep in huts with women they’re not married to unless they’re maybe related.”

She turned and looked around and sat on the edge of the single chair, arms folded at her midsection. Head lowered.

“Nobody will bother you here.”

She nodded and he continued staring at her.

“I can’t sleep with you because...I want...” He turned to the single window in the little room, staring out. “You agreed to come here and give your family a chance. This life a chance, right?”

When she didn’t answer, he looked over his shoulder.

She finally nodded and said, “Yes.” Her hands slid over her arms. “I know how to sleep with you and not...”

“But *I* can’t, Mia.”

“You can put the pillows between us.”

“And what will people say about that? Maybe this is why the men don’t look at you,” he realized. “Maybe they are thinking we’re together.”

“You said...I can return to you after a week.”

“After you had a chance to know what you want.”

Her pretty eyes snapped up to his. “I want *you*.”

His heart skipped five beats at that confession. “I rescued you from hell, it’s not uncommon for a woman to...bond with the person who does

that.”

Her brows drew together in confusion and hurt. “I do not know what that means, Jericho Flint,” she whispered. “I have...never known what’s in here,” she whispered, pressing her hand to her chest, tears making her blue eyes brilliant. “Until I saw myself in your pure reflection.”

He faced the window, shutting his eyes when the need to kiss her brought a dense ache to his stomach and cock. “One week here, Mia,” he said quietly. “And if what’s in your heart is still there, then I will personally come back for you myself.”

“Then you will surely come back,” she assured with a sweet fucking voice.

“I *sure* hope I do, Angel.”

Bullets kept moving Mia’s hand back to her lap at the table where they sat next to her brother and the Chieftain. Her father. Toasts and introductions had been made and Bullets realized he was being celebrated as much as Mia was. When things finally settled and conversation filled the large hall, Bullets leaned to Kaj, wondering, “Do your people think I’m with Mia?”

“With Mia?”

He glanced around, then leaned to his ear. “Intimately?”

He grinned without looking at him. “No.” Now he looked at him.

“Why do you ask?”

Bullets muttered, “Nobody looks at her. Except the women.”

He chuckled. “That’s because she’s my sister.”

Ah. Right. “That surely explains it.”

“Yes. Are you intimate with her?” he asked.

“No,” he said, probably too quickly.

“You mind if we talk outside?” Kaj asked, relieving Bullets only to realize Mia wouldn’t want to be left.

“Yeah but...”

Kaj stood and leaned his mouth to Mia’s ear. He watched her face, surprised to see her smile and even nod. Kaj pointed at a group of women and held his hand out for her. She took it and stood, pulling his ear down to her

mouth. He laughed and nodded, saying something back to her. His guts twisted at the beautiful smile she gave before she found his eyes all over her. She gave him a shy wave and he lowered his grin, looking around.

He watched as a beautiful woman hurried to the table and took Mia's hands then hugged her tightly before leading her off. He stared as she went, looking for signs of distress, his muscles clenching when she glanced over her shoulder and gave him a huge smile. Fuck, she was *fucking* breathtaking. He followed Kaj, keeping his eye on her as he did, still looking for any signals that required him. At the exit, he tore his gaze from her and followed him out, sitting next to him on a bench right outside the entrance.

"Do you *want* to be intimate with my sister?"

Bullets turned to Kaj, thrown by the direct question. "I want your sister to have a chance to live without a man breathing down her neck. I want her with a family that loves her. She needs a chance to be a young woman. Maybe she wants to travel, how would she know, she's never been given a chance to learn what it is she wants."

He nodded. "I hope my next question does not offend you."

He regarded him. "What is it?"

He leaned and put his elbows on his knees and angled his face toward him. "Do you want to be intimate with my sister?"

Jericho stared at him then looked away. "What I *want* is irrelevant. What she needs is the only important thing. That's what I'm here to see about. There are plenty of men here for her to...learn what she wants."

"You're willing to give her over to another man?"

"I'm willing to give her over to herself. To learn what's in her heart. To make her own decisions. That takes time, Kaj. You know that."

"I do," he said lightly. "I'm merely discovering what is in your mind and heart with her."

"What's in my mind and heart is to kill, *any* son-of-a-fuck that *dares* hurt her. That piece of shit in my prison? He ate his own balls for breakfast after I removed them. Those other *brothers* that hurt her? They'll have the same fate."

Kaj straightened, his jaw flint hard now. "What about your laws? Do they permit this judgment?"

"Law or *no* fucking law," Bullets swore. "*That* is the fate they'll get."

"We do not want a war but there will surely be one if your people

interfere with the judgment coming to them.”

“You will not get a war with us unless you *fail* to justly punish those devils. Then you will surely have a fucking war and I will be at the very front of it.”

Kaj turned and grabbed Bullet’s shoulder in a hard grip, locking his gaze on his. “I will be with you at the very front as well. As will all my warriors.” He drew out a blade and slid it across his palm, holding the knife to Bullets. He eyed it and took it, sliding the blade over his palm slowly. Kaj grabbed his hand in his and squeezed hard. “By this blood, I, Go-thee Kaj, unite with the Bullets in an unbreakable vow. Together, we pledge to guard Mia, my sister, against all harm. Our bond, sealed in blood, stands firm without the need for divine witness. In strength and unity, we commit to her protection. This oath binds our fates and honors our resolve. So be it.”

Bullets nodded, holding his fierce stare. “So be it.”

Kaj released his hand and returned his knife to his boot. “Tell me what is in your mind for our devils that I might join to ensure it is done with a perfection.”

Fuck yeah. “I’ll meet with the Grand Oratrice tomorrow. She’s our wise woman who determines the path of a judgment.”

“What do you expect to learn with her?”

“She’ll mostly set a date to hear the crime before the twelve auditors. Another group of women who hear crimes and issue judgments according to our laws.”

“And what do your laws say for such a thing that has happened to my sister?”

Bullets leaned back at that one. “That’s the tricky part. Nothing like this has ever happened before. What your—”

“No, *not my*, Battle-kin. Their,” he said, his fury surfacing for a glorious split second.

“What *they* did,” Bullets corrected, “has never been witnessed in our Hatches or entire Hoard that I’m *aware* of. Which means I don’t know how they will judge it. To solve that problem, I intend to provoke them to commit crimes common to our laws that I *can* punish.”

“Will you fight against your own people if they don’t serve proper justice?”

“I will serve proper justice even if I have to take whatever penalty it

comes with.”

Kaj regarded Bullets and grabbed his shoulder again with a nod. “You are indeed a true brother to me.” His hand slid off and he reclined, pulling out a small pipe from his robe. “What about your other brothers? How do they see this?”

“The very same as you and I do.”

He struck a match and put it to the tip of the pipe and puffed, handing it to Bullets.

He took it, not sure what to do with it, then mimicked what he had without taking any into his lungs then handed it back. “If the Auditors don’t rule in our favor, we’ll initiate a Delta Dog.”

He took the pipe from him. “Delta Dog.”

“It’s basically when we break the law to uphold a higher law and we do it without getting caught.”

Kaj turned his upper body a little toward him with a grin. “This is called a coup in your language, I believe.”

Bullets gave near-nods as he considered it. “I suppose.”

“And what will you do to provoke these devils?”

“How about you tell me. You should know what they absolutely can’t resist.”

He nodded slowly and surely. “A formal challenge.”

“What kind?”

“A fight. They can’t turn those down.”

Bullets’ blood stirred excitedly. “We call those bat-ties. But we only have them for small matters.”

Kaj looked at him. “Vikings have them for *big* matters.”

This had Bullets at the edge of his seat. “Well, *tell* me what to do.”

Kaj also sat forward, turning to him. “You issue a formal challenge that all the clan knows about. In this case, you want to fight those so-called husbands.”

“I call them the wife-beating *Vicki*’s.”

“Vicki’s?”

“It’s short for a Viking with a *pussy* in my book.”

Bullets eyed him as he laughed real big at that. “Vicki. I like this. I’m not a Vicki,” he assured.

“No, you’re not.”

He regarded him. "What am I in the world of Bullets?"
Bullets considered that and shrugged. "A fucking man."
He seemed to like that. "A fucking man. You like this word.

Fucking."

"It's fairly useful for many things."

"You are a peculiar man, Battle-kin."

"And you're a priest," Bullets remembered. "So...no women for you?"

He shook his head. "It's not forbidden."

Bullets realized, suddenly. "That can be the Delta Dog."

"What can?"

"The formal challenge to those Vicki's." Bullets looked at him.

"What do I get if I win?"

"Whatever you want of them."

"Their lives?"

"Surely," he said, like that was the most obvious. "You can also challenge more than one of them."

Bullets chuckled at him, reaching for the pipe. Kaj handed it to him.

"How many of these Vicki's you want me to challenge?"

"Those husbands. And their Priest."

"Their *Priest*?"

"He must answer for his sins that have imprisoned the clan in such wickedness. And it is my duty to defend the honor of my sister with those husbands as well as challenge the Priest."

Bullets looked right at him. "Well, you can't do *both*."

"No. But my blood brother Battle-Kin can defend my sister's honor in my place."

He nodded at him for several seconds. "Now we're talking. What about your other warrior brothers?"

"It is mine to choose. And I have chosen you."

Bullets didn't want to push it but was curious. "Why's that?"

"Because Fate seems to have chosen you as well."

Bullets puffed on the pipe, liking the smell of whatever was in it then handed it back. "So, when and where do these things happen?"

"That's a very good question," Kaj said. "We have not had such a challenge issued since we've been here."

Bullets remembered what Bart told him. “You ever hear of the Creole Viking Kings by any chance?”

Kaj jerked his head to him. “Yes. Where did you hear of them?”

“My Eveque’s brother. Said he wasn’t sure if they were myth or legend.”

“They are surely real,” he said, reaching for the pipe. Bullets handed it back, watching him puff on it. He held it in his lungs for a bit and released it. “They are not a people we associate with.”

“Why not?” Bullets took it back and puffed several times, filling the air with smoke around him.

“Because they don’t want to be associated with.”

“I hear they live underground. That true?”

“This is what I hear,” he said. “Vikingar Draugar.”

“The hell is that?”

“Viking Vampires. Very pale. And possess many kinds of powers.”

“Powers,” Bullets muttered, shaking his head at the air before him. “I call *bullshit* on that.”

Kaj laughed. “I know this term. And I agree. Their powers are of the natural kind.”

“Like what? Naturally born rich?”

“Naturally born intelligent. If rumor is true, they all possess some kind of cognitive gift.”

“Like a genius?”

He shrugged. “Intellectual prodigy of some kind?”

Bullets realized Kaj knew as much as he did, then thought of something else. “They live north of here, don’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Bayou Bishops’ jurisdiction ends at the long bridge.”

Kaj regarded him. “And?”

“We have no say in what happens beyond that.”

“I see. We only go there when selling alligator skins,” Kaj said, considering something.

Bullets’ stood and looked around at the empty village streets. “Where is everybody?”

“Mostly in the hall.”

“How many in your clan?”

“Only seventy-five.”

Huh. “How many of those Vicki’s are there?”

Kaj stood too. “Over two-hundred last I bothered to know such a thing. Maybe more now.” His gaze was nearly level with his, Bullet’s realized. “What are you thinking, Battle-Kin?”

“I’m thinking we need fighting grounds with some kind of legal jurisdiction on our side. Minimize bloodshed.” He held Kaj’s gaze. “The women and children need men, even if they *suck* at their job. And if we don’t have a strong-arm calling the shots, it’ll become a blood bath.”

Kaj tilted his head at him. “It’s against our ways to leave women and children destitute in these situations.”

Bullets stared back. “What do you do?”

“Adopt them into our clan.”

Point for them. “And what if they don’t want to join?”

He tapped the remaining contents of the pipe onto the ground. “Then they don’t.” He returned it to his robe.

“Nice.”

“You approve?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“We are not so different, I think,” Kaj said.

The sound of singing and drums got louder inside, and Bullets looked at the entrance. “You think she’s okay in there?”

He chuckled and nodded. “I do.”

“What did you tell her back there, anyway. She was scared then she wasn’t.”

“I told her I needed to talk to you and find out all your secret feelings about her. She asked if I would share it and I said I would but only if she promised to say hi to the ladies who were dying to meet her.” Kaj regarded him with raised brows. “She must really like you to face such fears.”

Fuck. Bullets lowered his head. “She’s...infatuated. I saved her life, it’s not uncommon.”

“Well, like you said...” He sat again and stretched his legs out with his hands behind his head. “She needs a chance to date all these warriors. See which one she likes. And every one of them would give their lives to have her. If I were to permit it.”

Oh really. “So, you’re holding the tidal wave of men back? Is that it?”

He nodded. "I surely am."

Bullets sat too again, considering that and what needed to happen.

"Well...don't," he said.

Kaj laughed at that, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"What?"

"I think I just heard your dick crack."

"My dick has nothing to do with her."

"You do realize you're doing a terrible job of hiding your feelings for her?"

Bullets slid a hand over his head and shrugged. "Doing my best."

"Maybe I will let the tidal wave of men loose to help you."

"Help me," he muttered.

"Yeah. Help you realize you'll never approve of another man having her."

"I've been celibate for twenty years oh holy *brother*," he informed.

"Really," Kaj said, regarding him with impressed brows.

"Really."

"And then you met my beautiful sister, Mia. What is that American tale? Humpty Dumpty fell off a wall?"

"Never heard of it," Bullets said, grinning at Kaj's big laugh.

"Sounds like there's dancing going on in there," Kaj said, looking behind him then back at Bullets. "Let's go see what's happening."

CHAPTER NINE

Mia searched the room for Bullets for the fiftieth time, her stomach ready to empty itself right on the floor in front of all the nice people. She had to be dreaming. But then not even her dreams ever resembled what was happening all around her. So much...kindness. And love. She felt like she knew Olsa, Oda, and Nesa all her life and she'd only spoken to them for a short time. They took her out the back door and snuck her to their home and dressed her like a royal princess. But she felt like a bride and couldn't help but look around for the only husband she'd ever have again. Her Mirror Man.

She'd decided they were already married. Well, she was. All that was left was getting him to commit to the same. And in one week, he seemed to say he would. But she would not beg such a thing out of him or force it. He had to do everything on his own so she knew it was real for him as much as it was for her.

After deciding she was his wife, it was much easier to deal with all the males everywhere. Jericho said they weren't looking at her but every time she checked, they were. All of them! All of them except Hakon which had her forever worried over why. Did she somehow displease him? Surely he knew of her previous arrangement with her husbands. Did he feel disgusted the way Jericho did about it? Perhaps he saw her as part to blame. Or saw the filth it had put on her spirit. He was aide to her brother who was a spirit leader. What if he possessed spirit eyes too?

Nobody knew she was Jericho's secret wife but her. The men all wanted to dance with her, they wanted to feed her, they wanted to talk to her. None of them acted as if they wanted to do any of those things so they could marry her. They were her family, she remembered. Could they just be treating her like their sister? She'd never experienced such a thing. And she wanted that, she wanted to be kind back to them.

Hakon made his way to her with two drinks and sat on the bench

without looking at her. “As your brother’s right hand,” he informed loudly over the music, handing her the drink, “it is my duty to assist you with anything you need.”

She took it, looking around for Bullets again as her pulse raced too fast. “Thank you,” she said, realizing she hadn’t. He was trying to make her feel at ease, she knew.

“Are you feeling welcomed?” he asked, leaning toward her.

She leaned and yelled, “Yes,” with a nod then looked in the metal cup in her hand. She sniffed.

“It’s grape juice,” he called.

“Do you know where my brother is?” she asked, not mentioning Jericho.

He leaned toward her. “I saw him talking with Mr. Bullets outside.”

She had also thought Hakon might not like Jericho. He was an outsider. Her clan did not like outsiders coming into their clans. And he had saved her. She recalled the way she’d clung to him in front of everybody. What had they all thought of that under their smiles? Was Hakon being nice to her because of who she was to her brother? And who her brother was to her father?

And her father. Did he truly like her? Or resent her? Her mother, his wife, committed adultery. According to her age, she may or may not be his daughter. Judging by his demeanor, he may or may not care which was the truth. Or care for either truths. But her brother on the other hand loved her enough for them both. She smiled to herself about it. She’d nearly *immediately* felt a connection with him. Something in his eyes. Much like Jericho. A crystal clear mirror of what he thought and felt of her. He made her feel every bit the princess he’d first called her. Princessa Mia.

“You should dance,” Hakon called to her.

She shook her head a lot. “I...I never learned.” But even if she had, she’d never been permitted.

He stood before her with his hand out. “I can teach you. It’s easy.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet then took her drink and set it down. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest as she wondered what to do. She wanted to fit in as much as she didn’t want to dance. He took her in his arms without warning and directed her hand in his. “Follow my steps. It’s very simple.”

She focused on doing as told, and after a few times, she realized he was right, it was very simple.

“You got it!” he laughed, picking up the pace a little.

She looked around at the others dancing just like them as her feet remembered the tune playing and her body filled with the knowledge as well. Soon they were moving around the room and all by itself, laughter rushed up and out as it felt like they were flying.

“You’re natural,” he yelled.

Her laughter vanished as she caught sight of Jericho. She strained to look behind her as they continued to move across the floor. The dance moves changed, and she was suddenly pressed against Hakon’s body.

“I’m tired,” she yelled in his ear. “I want to stop.”

She was shocked at how quickly he released her and then led her back to her table where she sat out of breath.

He suddenly pulled her hand up to his mouth and *kissed* it. “Thank you, Princess, for the dance.”

Her pulse hammered as she stared at him, shocked over so many things at once. He was looking right at her, and he’d *kissed* her hand.

“Please excuse me, your brother is calling me.”

She watched him hurry off, realizing she’d not said a word and her mouth was still open from the surprise. She realized what else alarmed her. How kind he was. And gentle. And very strong. And...he smelled very clean. She recalled the way he smiled at the very last. Made him look so different. And much more handsome.

She stood and looked around, ready to find Jericho. She fought off the many invitations to talk, to dance, to eat, even from the women as she made her way. She spotted the exit and hurried to it, determined to run if they tried to stop her.

Finally outside, she realized it was late afternoon already. She froze at seeing Jericho, sitting on a bench and a woman next to him. He glanced back right at that second and his stormy blue eyes locked right onto hers.

She tore herself from his prison and hurried herself down the path to the little house Hakon showed her to earlier, her heart raging in her chest while pain strangled her stomach into knots. He was only talking to a woman, there was nothing wrong with that. It didn’t mean anything. She’d talked to Hakon. But Hakon was being an aide to her brother and therefore her. What

was Jericho doing? What was his reason for talking to a woman? A very, very, beautiful one, she realized, racing faster to the little house.

She finally made it there and hurried in, shutting the door quickly. She held the handle as she fought to catch her breath, closing her eyes. She spun around and pressed her back against the door, her breath loud in her ear.

She yelped at the sudden knock, gasping. “Who is it?” she called, closing her eyes.

“It’s Jericho *Flint*,” he said lowly.

Her pulse beat harder somehow as she turned and paused with her hand on the door. “I’ll be right out.”

“I’ll be in my room,” he said. “Come talk to me when you’re done. Please,” he added gruffly.

She again turned and collapsed against the door, steadying her breathing. He sounded angry. He’d seen her dancing. What if he was jealous?

Excitement had her back to needing to vomit. She wanted him to be *so jealous*, she realized. But she also didn’t want him to hurt. What should she do? Tell him her marriage decision she’d made? He wanted her to *fly*. To *learn* what she wanted.

So very sweet, and noble, and *stupid*.

She couldn’t tell him her decision till after the week. He would make her suffer the days even if she did tell him. And after her days of suffering, if she still felt the same, then...then what? He never did say exactly. Maybe he would make her suffer more days while with him. Weeks of suffering in the same house as she *learned* what she already knew, how much she needed him, wanted him, craved him.

She paced now, trapped between his kindness and her hunger. What he’d done to her in that bathroom...she needed to do back to him. So much. To imagine spending *days* not seeing him was mental agony and physical death to her. Three days, four days, five days. All of it was too long. She’d spent so many years without him, needing him and now she could only barely have him.

She had to find a way to suffer it. That was all.

But perhaps there was a way to have what she craved without violating Jericho’s strict, protective principles.

Her heart was back to pounding her chest as she considered ideas. Her womb clenched painfully as her pulse filled that spot he’d *sucked*. She

wanted to show him how good she was with her mouth. It was one of her greatest sexual talents and of all the men to show it to, to lavish that gift on, was her beautiful Jericho Flint.

He'd had no woman. Ever? Would she be his first to give him such pleasures? The way he was her first? Was it not right that he too know what passion and pleasure felt like from a woman? He'd *made her* to feel it. Should she not also *make him* to suffer and *feel* it also?

Bullets released the doorhandle, returning himself to the chair and planting his ass. She'd come when she was ready. That was the fucking point of all of this. Letting her spread her wings and do what the fuck she wanted without the pressure of *anybody* influencing that. Except he was supposed to drop her off and then *leave*. Not *watch* her laughing and dancing with another fucking man.

Kaj was righter than *motherfucking rain* about him not able to accept *any* man she picked. But he'd gone and threw that gift right the fuck away.

This is exactly what needed to happen.

You—out of it.

Her—in it.

You—shut the fuck up.

Her—speaking.

Let her fucking speak. You should be so grateful just to be standing next to the chance of having her.

Jericho scrubbed his face, shaking his head. He just wanted to explain *one* thing to her. Just...*one* thing. That woman. She'd sat on that bench *uninvited*. He'd intended to use the opportunity to learn what he could about the women there. He knew how females could be in any culture. Vicious. And with Mia, he didn't see gender when a threat showed its face, no matter what that face looked like.

The wind left him as his mind replayed the moment. The look on her face. Like he'd betrayed her. She needed to know that he'd *never...fucking ever...do* such a thing.

He pulled his phone out, checking the messages he'd sent to Eveque. It'd been over an hour since he'd knocked on her door. Where was she?

Messages all still unsent. The signal out there was shitty. He'd have to ask where to fucking stand to get those messages out or even make a phone call. He might not even make the virtual meeting.

He launched from his seat at the knock on the door and jerked it open. And *there* she was. His impossible sucre Mia reve. Standing there, looking... pissed.

He stepped aside and she walked in right as he realized she carried some kind of satchel. His stomach burned with all the bad ways this could go as he shut the door and locked it.

He turned, finding her sitting at the table in one of the chairs, unloading items from the leather looking purse. "In my culture we have rules," she announced. "When you make a commitment, it's the same as signing a contract. I have committed to remaining here and giving myself a chance to be a young girl even though I am already a woman, and you have committed to returning for me in five days."

"Four," he corrected, not missing her sarcasm one bit. "If we're not counting today." He stilled himself against the insane fucking hungers she provoked in him with only a look. He loved her sweet side but seeing her in any kind of strength seemed to be his cock's favorite thing. He wanted her to be so fucking strong. But *not pissed* at *him*.

"You have committed to returning for me in four days," she corrected.

"If you want me to, yes."

"There must be a signing of this in the flesh," she announced, back to sorting her items.

He looked at them, realizing what it was. Tattoo equipment. "You want me to get a tattoo about it?"

"This is the rule."

He raised both hands. "Happily. When and where? I'm there."

"Now and here," she said, like he might for some reason protest.

Then it hit him. "*You're* doing it?"

"I was my clans flúrmeistari. This is a skin artist?"

Of course. Why wouldn't she be? She was everything else that involved *skin*. "Do whatever you need to."

She lowered her eyes. "You will need to remove your clothes."

Oh *fuck*. "My shirt?"

"This agreement goes on the male's phallus. Unless you do not wish

to make such an agreement.”

His *cock*? The pulsing in it got unbearable at just the idea. She sounded sure he wouldn't want to. He realized what this was about. She needed proof of his commitment. “You want me sitting or standing?”

The barest falter in her gaze confirmed it. This had been some kind of bluff, and he'd just called it.

“Sitting,” she said, back to moving her items an inch from where they currently were.

He undid the buckle on his belt, waiting for her to protest.

Call it off.

He pulled the other chair next to hers when he realized he couldn't do that now. *She'd* have to call it off. Had she even thought that far?

He lowered his pants, and she cleared her throat, opening a can of something while setting a needle on the table and a tiny looking hammer. He sat in the chair and pushed his jeans and underwear to his ankles and left his legs open a little. He held the base of his dick in one hand, knowing without a doubt that things were about to pass a point he couldn't return from. “Where does it go?”

“The ring of trust goes where it is most pleasurable since pleasure is often what leads men astray.”

Interesting. “And where does the woman's ring of trust go?”

The way she paused and didn't answer brought another astonishing revelation. Was she *making* this up?

“On the arm,” she finally answered, her lie silky.

“Why the arm?” he asked.

“Because...this represents being his servant.”

“Well, I don't *want* a servant. So, we'll need to have a different kind of flesh contract I think.”

“Fine, we can discuss it after yours.”

“Fine,” he decided, opening his knees a little more. “Give me the fucking ring of fire.”

She suddenly put both hands in her lap, starting at the table. “You're angry. I don't see the point of doing it if you're angry, there should be no anger with this.”

Fucking interesting. “I'm not angry, Mia,” he assured. “I'm just *extremely* ready.”

“I think it’s fine since you’re not of the same culture that we give you the ring where you normally wear one.”

“I don’t normally wear one. But if I’m going to wear a ring for you, I’d like it exactly where you said it goes. So there is *never* a doubt in your mind about who I belong to.”

He realized her hands were shaking. “I can’t,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because...I don’t want to hurt you.”

His cock jerked at her answer. “Why did you come here with this story, Mia?”

“I just...wanted to show you.”

“Show me what?” he asked softly. “Look at me.”

She barely turned in her chair, facing him. With her eyes closed.

For some reason, it got him harder. “Am I *that* different from these warriors?”

She shook her head.

“No? Just another dick?”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“You’re nothing like the warriors,” she whispered, her chest heaving. “You’re nothing like any man.”

“Why did you lie about this?”

“I just...I wanted to...make you suffer it.”

“Suffer *what*?” he said quietly, unable to stop himself from squeezing his cock.

“Suffer the way you made me suffer. Suffer you to know what my passion feels like.”

Oh fuck. *Not* what he’d dreamed she’d say. She wanted to give him pleasure. Passion. Make him suffer, like he’d made her suffer. That’s what this was all about?

He opened his knees more as fire engulfed him. “Then fucking do it. Make me suffer your pleasure and passion. Just like I made you suffer. With your mouth. Your fucking tongue. All over my cock. Is that what you want to show me?”

Her gaze was on his dick now as she panted with a small nod.

He reached between his legs, stroking his full balls while watching

the desire become more potent on her face. Fuck, he needed to stop. “You want me to beg, Ma sucre Mia reve?”

She gasped and moved onto her knees between his legs, stealing his breath.

“Yeah,” he barely breathed, so fucking lost as he angled his head at her. “*Please* put your fucking mouth all over my cock.”

She slid her hands along his inner thighs, her fingers hard and hungry on their way up. He moved out of her way, holding real tight to the edge of the chair.

“Oh fuck,” he whispered, his breaths thick as she wrapped her tiny hand around the base. “This is why you’re pissed at me? You needed to make me suffer with you?”

She gave a sweet moan, dragging her tongue from the base to the top before using the tip to draw her own ring of fire around the crown.

“Fucking baby,” he gasped, already drunk with lust as he opened wider. “I’m going to make you suffer again for this,” he swore, her sharp gasp burning him along with the random suck-bites she gave along the head of his dick. “Your fucking sweet mouth, Mia. You drive me crazy *every* second of the fucking day, baby. You’re sucking the head so fucking good? I’m going to eat your pussy till you’re screaming,” he grit, pumping his hips. His breath shot out as she sucked one of his balls then the other. “Oh fuck,” he whispered, angling his head as she nibbled the length of his cock with her teeth. She did the same along his head, bringing his lust to dangerous limits. “Mia...you’re making me so fucking hot. Oh fuck,” he grit when she took his entire cock to the back of her throat. Several groans strained out of him and he couldn’t fucking keep his hands off her head or her hair from his tight grip. “Your fucking tight, hot throat,” he seethed, gasping for air.

Her hands gripped his pecks and her fingers dug in as she bobbed her head, forcing his dick to pump against her throat.

“Mia,” he gushed, helping her with that perfect fucking rhythm. He opened his legs wider, rolling his hips as her moans tingled in his balls. She pulled slowly up his cock, her mouth so fucking *tight*. At the head, she made the rough part of her tongue rub against the slit while her fucking teeth hit the ridge.

“You’re fucking killing me, holy *ffffuuuck*,” he gasped. She dropped back to the base, and he met the boiling tightness with a flick of his hips,

helping her with both hands. She pounced on the head with her throat as her hands roamed over his fucking body, nails digging everywhere they went, turning his every breath ragged, his groans thick and nasty. “God, your fucking mouth is too perfect on my dick baby,” he said. “You want to make me fucking come, yeah?”

She squeezed the inside of his thighs with a deep moan, moving up and down on his cock with the tightest, fastest motion.

“Oh baby,” he barely gasped. “My balls are fucking tight and full. Don’t fucking stop. Suck my fucking cock my sweet *fucking* Angel, oh fuck, fuck, fuck!” He bucked his hips and clenched his eyes tight, groaning and seething so long and hard through the most intense orgasm while Mia’s throat praised him in mind-blowing miraculous ways.

At the very last of his pleasure, Mia stood and did something she’d never done before but fantasized doing to Jericho. She grabbed his face and *kissed* him. But her plan to deny him from returning the pleasure came under the sudden hard grip of his hands on her waist as he opened his mouth and gave her everything she wanted, which was every inch of him. And he gave it with such a hot, hot hunger, his tongue licking all over hers, his breaths thick and coming quickly.

She grabbed his hands and hurried back, releasing him. “Just you,” she said, her words shaking with the rest of her.

His beautiful brows drew together over his eyes, heavy with the pleasure she’d given. “Really?” he gasped as she licked her lips, encountering a salty flavor that made her ravenous for him.

“Now we are even.”

He leaned down and pulled his pants up, back to burning her with his gaze as he put his beautiful cock away. “You sure you want to start a pleasure war with me, Angel?”

Her womb jerked and she took a step back, his words and stare burning her everywhere. Not just his words but that he meant them. Pleasure war. She had never ever thought of such a thing between a man and a woman. Five seconds of imagining had her taking another step back.

“Four days, Ma sucre, Mia reve. *Then* I’ll pay you back.” Heat burned in his stormy blue eyes as his mouth tugged with the barest smile, those delicious lips becoming a supple temptation.

She wondered what now? Were they to remain apart all night? She lowered her eyes. “I guess I need to go to my room.”

“You *really* do, Angel,” he said, walking toward her.

She froze as he took her face in his hands and covered her mouth with his beautiful lips. He pressed them so softly on hers before barely moving with gentle motions. To think she would have these lips to kiss whenever she wanted had her moaning and gasping.

He stepped away, breathless, staring at her. “You need *everything*, don’t you Angel?” he asked, tormented.

She nodded, hoping that wasn’t bad.

“I can’t stand not giving it. Me being here is a very bad idea. Every second I spend with you, look at you, *want* you, is making everything so fucking pointless.”

She lowered her head, biting her tongue on another protest. Her time here was important to him. “You should go, then.”

“Do you hate me?” he asked so very quietly.

She looked at him and shook her head a lot. “Never. I...” She lowered her head, remembering to go slow. “I would never hate you for wanting to protect me.”

“Good. Because that’s all I ever want to do. You believe that, right, Angel?”

Something tugged hard in her chest and stomach at the beg in his tone. She hurried to him and wrapped her arms around him tight. “I do believe it with all my heart,” she gasped. “Tusen Takk, Jericho Flint. Tusen Takk for loving me.”

CHAPTER TEN

Patches spun Tegan against the wall and pressed his hard cock against her jeaned ass. “God, you fucking drive me crazy,” he said, taking her hands and putting them behind her. He couldn’t go a second without wanting to fuck her and his body and mind insisted he oblige. They were technically in their honeymoon phase so the rest of life could fuck off as he gave their hungers free reign in his schedules. It wasn’t often everything was right in his world, and he wasn’t wasting the gift. Tuesday’s hurricane saw him successfully deliver three healthy babies followed by a celebratory amazing fuck with his wife. Wednesday blessed him with the ability to save his brother’s life and today would see him finally share his wife with his Grand Piere.

Tegan wanted to wait another day, but the world needed to officially be told, and his Grand Pier was first.

“I’m just...”

“Scared, I know,” he said, filling his fingers with her hair and turning her face. He sucked the silky skin, and she gave him his addiction, all those erotic, desperate sounds that would never get old. He gripped the crack of her perfect ass, ready to make all those fuck positions he’d fantasized a reality. “I want to see my cock buried in you from behind.”

“Yes,” she gasped, her eyes closed.

His cock lurched, imagining it buried *in* her ass. Fuck that was a little much on the first week. But he knew without a devious, lustful doubt that he’d surely build her to that. “My Grand Pier first without *another* word from you except ‘Yes, husband’ then I will limit your punishments.”

Her mouth opened and out came his favorite—so much breathless rapture. So much need for every bit of it. His fingers tightened in her hair as he watched it grow, felt it define his endless lust. Fuck, she was too perfect.

He gradually released her hair then smoothed it with his fingers,

giving the side of her face a light kiss before popping her ass real good with his palm.

He grinned at the loud yelp and stepped away before he couldn't. He held his hand out to her, and she took it, smiling. "Yes, *husband*," she said.

He shook his head, amazed.

"What?" she wondered, her cute accent a fucking nibble right on his dick.

"You're *too* much." He put his palm on her chest. "But no closer."

She busted out laughing, shoving at his arm and he added his other hand to her face, loving how funny she found that.

He withdrew both and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "No touching me." He grunted when she grabbed his dick behind her. "Texas," he strained at her ear.

"Whuuut!" she drawled innocently then laughed real big, her fingers dancing on his cock.

He shoved her off and pointed her to the door. "Out."

She howled laughing, making her way to it.

"Stay four feet ahead of me."

"Are we hiding still?" she wondered, batting her lashes. "I don't mind if you want to. I like when you sneak a peek or a pass. Get me in a closet."

"Open the door. We're doing this now. You're not distracting me."

She gave a huge sigh and eye roll before moaning. "Fine. But if he hates it, I'm going to *die*, and it'll be *your* fault!"

"He won't hate it."

"Alright," she said lightly, final warning. "It's *your* fine ass on the line too, not just mine."

He grinned, following her. In the stairwell, he grabbed her hand and held it tight. She stopped at the top before the door, looking down at their hands then up at him. "You sure about that, swamp-boy?"

"*Very*."

She shook her head with a sigh. "You're like a damn see-saw," she muttered.

"Call it a preview of what I'll announce tomorrow," he muttered. "Less of a shock, hopefully."

"If anybody is shocked after the noise we've made down there, then they're dumb and deaf as a brick."

He stole a quick kiss and opened the door before she could retaliate, and he led her through the quiet open corridor. She sucked in a breath at hearing the crying babies and he tugged her along when she slowed, glancing at Becky's room.

"We'll visit when we're done," he whispered, hurrying them.

Tegan swallowed down her nausea when they got to Grand Pier's room. She yanked Patches. "What if he's sleeping?"

"Then I'm waking him up," he countered, pecking her forehead, and knocking on his door.

"Meh, come in!"

He winked at her and smiled, opening the door and pulling her inside. She tugged her hand, and he gripped it tighter, shutting the door and making his way to his bed where his grandfather looked at something with a magnifying glass.

When Patches sat on the bed next to him, he put the tool down and her heart stuttered at the huge, toothless smile and half-moon eyes he gave him. "Meh, you comin' tell me a bedtime story or you sneakin' me some more of dat puddin'?" He went suddenly serious. "Shooooo meh dat was good stuff."

She had to laugh with Patches while her stomach knotted more. "I came to tell you something very important, Grand Pier."

His bushy brows went up. "Oh? Meh what?"

She eyed Patches who took the old man's hand in his and suddenly looked tongue tied with a heart melting smile on his pretty mouth. "I fell in love, Grand Pier."

The old man busted out laughing at that before finally saying, "Meh, I'm glad you figured that out? Everybody but you done know'd that Texas stole you heart?"

He let out a laugh, but Tegan heard the relief and the idea he'd been worried made her want to kiss him all over his precious face.

"I know I said I was marrying a bayou girl, but—"

"Awwwww, no, no, no, mon bee-bee," he said, putting his other hand on top of Patches' and patting it. "Tell Grand Pier how you know that I *only*

want mon bee-bee to be so happy.”

Panic clutched Tegan’s chest when Patches brought their hands to his mouth, his eyes clenched tight. “Thank you Grand Pier,” he whispered. “I only ever wanted to make you happy.” He looked at the old man. “It’s what I live for.”

Tegan blinked around tears and gasped when Grand Pier started crying too.

“Meh, you know every day I wake up and take a breath in this ole body, I do it all for mon bee-bee?” He pulled Patches to him and hugged his head, patting it.

Patches let go a tight sob and Tegan’s followed as she put her arms around both of them.

“Such a good petite garcon,” Grand Pier cooed, putting his arm around Tegan. “And dis joli petite Texas. Awwwww, sha pee-chay,” he said as they all cried now.

“Merci,” Patches whispered in French. “Jeh-tehm, Grand Piere. Jeh-tehm tell-e-mint.”

“Mehhhhhh, I love you *more*.”

“We might have to fight about that one,” Tegan cried, bringing Grand Pier’s big big laugh. Five seconds of that and they were all laughing and lord, Tegan had never loved anything more in all her life. Patches grabbed Grand Pier’s face and kissed his forehead like five times then did the same to her, right on her mouth.

Bullets stood in the quiet solitude of his house, feeling ripped in two. The usual peace he had there was replaced with a dense ache in every inch of every bone. Four fucking days. It could have easily been four years and he needed to thank God that it was mere days. And just stay fucking busy.

His phone buzzed and he pulled it out. *Kaj*.

His heart got way too dramatic in his chest as he answered. “Yeah?”

“Found a contact for our Creole brethren.”

He switched ears, resisting the urge to ask about Mia. “Good.”

“Most of what was said turned out accurate.”

“This source is reliable?”

“My grandmother,” he said.

“That’s pretty reliable.”

“Very.”

“She knows how we can find them?”

“She knew something even better. The name of one of their Ver-ther, which apparently all thirteen have.”

“Thirteen what?”

“Kings.”

“They have thirteen kings?”

“And each one has a Ver-ther which is like a warden or warrior. But according to my grandmother, the Kings have no need of a warden, they are all lethal human weapons.”

Bullets was already smirking. “For *what?*”

“No idea on that one. Sounds like something archaic and outdated.”

“Right. And she knows one of the... Wardens?”

“Yes. Or how to reach them. The Kings hold an annual kind of contest—apparently they’re very competitive, much like all Vikings. Their job as Kings is to select members for the lineage and that’s determined in the competition.”

“People *want* to join that?”

“I can only guess on that one.”

Bullets took a breath, having to know. “How’s Mia?”

He chuckled. “Took you long enough to ask.”

“I’m giving her space.”

“I know,” he said lightly. “But you don’t have to hide your feelings for her with me.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Good. I just thought you’d want to know that first and foremost.”

Bullets quirked. “I did, but I chose to let you speak first. You interrogating me about her? Because there’s nothing to interrogate.”

“No?”

He realized how that sounded. “She knows my feelings and she’s the only one that needs to.”

“Battle-Kin,” Kaj said lowly and with clear warning. “That may be true in your culture, but it is surely *not* in mine. As her brother, she is *all* my

business.”

Bullets could do nothing but appreciate that. “Well, what do you want to know? How often I think about her? You want to know what I’m thinking too? Should I start a list and keep it running?”

He laughed. “That would be helpful.”

“Let me just make it simple and quick. She’s all I think about outside of how I’m going to kill the men that hurt her. So, if you tell me how she’s doing, we can get on with that.”

“She’s doing miserably,” he announced.

“You sound happy about that.”

“Because I may like the idea of my sister with you, Battle-Kin.”

“I’m smiling,” Bullets informed. “But I don’t want her miserable. Ever. What do you have in mind for that?”

He gave a sigh. “I plan to take her hunting now that I know she loves it. I want to see what all she knows and get to know what’s in her mind and heart while I’m at it. Any questions you’d like me to ask her?”

Bullets gave a snort before actually considering. “Ask her if she’s ready for that ring of fire I owe her.”

“Hmm. I think I *don’t* want to ask that.”

Bullets laughed. “Not me, you don’t. But ask *her*. I want to know what she says. So, who is our Voldore with these Viking Kings?”

“Ver-ther,” he chuckled. “His name is Hark. He’s the Ver-ther for the Seventh King. Which is apparently like their top King. And she had no idea why the seventh is the top king,” he said, curious about the same things Bullets was.

“So, who’s calling him?”

“Well, my Grandmother said a *woman* needs to call his Frey-yah or secretary as neither the Kings or their Ver-ther’s speak to males not within their ranks.”

“I’m impressed beyond speech,” Bullets said with a huge smirk.

“Our thoughts are one and the same, Battle-Kin.”

“So, we need a female.” Bullets remembered Belle Eveque’s gift of persuading. “I think I have somebody we can ask that will be perfect.”

“Who?”

“My Eveque’s wife. Apparently, she has a gift for compelling people.”

“Gifts are good with the Creole Kings. They thrive off them.”

“In that case, she has a sister that is gifted too. Much like our Seer.”

“Your Seer?”

“Yes. He sees things about people when he touches them. His father has a similar gift if I understand.”

“This is very interesting. If we can get an audience with these Kings, the more gifts we bring, the better our chances of making alliances.”

Bullets wondered. “There’s a lot we don’t know about them still.”

“What is in your mind, Battle-Kin?”

He shook his head. “Are we sure we want them for our alliance? Maybe we need to know more about who we’re allying with before we do.”

“Let me dig some more,” Kaj said.

“While you do that, I’ll call Eveque and update him.”

“Ring my phone anytime, Battle-Kin.”

He nodded. “Kiss Mia for me. On the cheek,” he added, grinning.

“I will give her a big wet one just for you.”

Bullets hung up and dialed Eveque’s number, propping his foot on a kitchen chair.

“What you got?” Eveque answered.

“Something you’ll really like.”

“Gimme.”

“We were looking for a sure way to get our Vicki’s. Well, Kaj informed me that official challenges to Vikings *cannot* go unanswered. If we challenge them to a fight, they have to accept.”

“But?”

“This isn’t like our Bat-ties, it’s the real deal. Winner gets whatever they want. But we don’t want a full out war.”

“No, we fucking don’t,” Bishop agreed. “These are families.”

“Exactly. But Kaj said they can’t be trusted without being strong armed. Those Vicki’s are several hundred strong. And we can’t fight here in our swamp.”

“What are you thinking?”

“That Delta Dog we talked about? I don’t think we’ll need to even use it if we fight north of the bridge, outside of our jurisdiction.”

“Oui,” Bishop said. “And the bloodbath problem?”

“The Creole Viking Kings.”

“You learned more?”

“Kaj has a contact name, but they need a female to call. Turns out they have Thirteen Kings, and each have a Warden or some kind of male mediator that handles the front end of business in their behalf. But they only deal with people who go through their secretaries. Females. They don’t deal with males outside of their rank.”

“Mon Dieu,” he muttered, unimpressed.

“Oui,” Bullets thoroughly agreed.

“You’re thinking they have the ability to stand as a strong arm?”

“From what I’ve gathered, they aren’t a small operation in the swamps. What they do is worldwide.”

“And what *do* they do?”

“Look for people with gifts, supposedly to protect the gifts.”

“Protect,” he muttered, highly skeptical.

“That’s the *story*. I don’t buy half of it, but if they have strength even in numbers, they could serve as an ally possibly in other things as well.”

“If they’re not actually an enemy already.”

“Well, if they are, we’d want to know that too.”

“Oui, we would.”

“Kaj is digging for more information. His Grandmother is his resource on what he’s learned so far.”

“I need to see what Bart unearthed since last we talked,” Bishop said.

“I can call and fill him in,” Bullets suggested. “I need something to do.”

“Ah. How is Mia?”

“She’s home. Stretching her wings.”

He chuckled. “You sound like a man fit to be tied.”

“I am.”

“You worried about her there? You met these people?”

“I did and no, I’m not worried. Her brother loves her, and everybody practically worships him. Nobody’s crossing lines, that’s for sure.”

“So?”

He paced a few steps, debating on what to say.

“You put your dick in it, I already fucking know.”

He paused. “How?”

He busted out laughing. “I didn’t, but now I do.”

Sneaky fuck. "I was going to tell you."

"Oh oui," he said, in sure disbelief.

"I'm madly fucking in love with her. I'm giving her a chance to know what the fuck she wants in life. She's just rescued from a nightmare, you know how it goes, you had the same situation. But I didn't put my dick in it, only dreamed of it."

"I surely understand where you are. Hold on tight, mon frier, that's all we can do. So how long is this wait?"

Bullets felt stupid telling him. "Four days." He nodded through Eveque's burst of laughter. "I know it's not fucking long enough."

"*Mon Dieu, these women!* I will need to inform the Belle Eveque so she can remove you from her matchmaking list."

"Please yes."

"Ah damn," Bishops said. "You know the ball is this Sunday. And selections are already scheduled to attend."

"Fuck," he muttered, trying to remember which ones he'd even picked.

"If you don't make an appearance, I fear our swamp rebels will use it as fuel in their fire."

"I'm supposed to get her Monday."

"The ball is Sunday. Make a show and we'll figure out what to do after."

"And Mia?"

"She is your wife as far as I am concerned. Get her as scheduled. And for your sake, I pray these four days go fas-fas."

Bullets let out a relieved breath. "Thank you. I'll call Bart and see what he knows."

"Oui. Keep me posted."

"How's Seer?" he remembered.

"Already recovering."

"Wow. Amazing," Bishops said.

"Very."

"And Nitro?"

"Ninety percent healed."

"That's fucking *insane*."

"Very. Call me back, Belle Eveque is ringing me."

Bishop regarded their odd group of twenty as they waited for The King's Assessor to determine whether they would even get to meet with the Kings at all. Wasn't sure why he had to meet them for that but given who they were and what they were about, Seer thought it was to see what they could see, implying gifts like he had.

"Tell me again what they told you," Bishop said to his Petite, stroking her outer thighs where she sat on the tailgate of the Black Bastard. "From the phone call," he added, stealing a kiss before she did.

"Very few questions," she remembered. "My name, where I heard of them, and my purpose for speaking to the Kings. I told them my name—" She smiled. "Elizabeth Wolfgang *Bishop*. And that we needed to negotiate with them concerning a matter of importance in the swamp. Oh, and about us having gifted people they would be very interested in meeting." She cupped her hand next to her mouth, discreetly adding, "I didn't include myself because I still don't agree I have a gift."

He focused on those details before getting distracted with all his favorite things about her. "And she put you on hold you said?"

"Yes, for liiiiike..." She squinted and angled her head up. "Two minutes, maybe three. Then she told us to meet them at the Grand Prairie rest stop thirty four miles north of the long bridge and that they'd—"

"Think this is them," Seer announced from where he sat on his land dragon.

"Oh," Beth whispered impressed as a large black SUV parked next to them. "Stay put with the ladies," he said to Beth, slowly making his way over. He'd brought everybody to give these Kings plenty of goodies to choose from. His Twelve and the wives, minus Cherie who stayed with Raphael. He also brought Ruckus and Kaj just in case having a Viking and an ex-Satanist might somehow be of service.

Bishop stood next to Seer as the passenger door opened and a giant dude stepped out looking exactly as he'd imagined. Jet black hair, partly down, partly up, partly braided, loaded with glossy tattoos that looked freshly inked. But no archaic Viking attire. The modern mix of leather and expensive silk was all black and tailored to hug every bulging muscle. Dark shades hid

his eyes as he opened the rear door. Guessing it was The Kings' Assessor sliding gracefully out of the SUV. Another giant of a man with the same kind of hair, plus a matching beard sporting a single streak of silver down its center. Same kind of tattoos, maybe more on his face and the portion of his shaved head. Though he seemed to lack the insane bulge in muscles, it did *not* lessen the lethality he carried. His attire was different too, he realized. Ancient Viking nobility with a dash of modern flare.

He realized the first giant would likely be his Ver-thur or bodyguard. They were nothing at all like the Cajun Vikings, that's for sure.

The man came right up to Bishop like he knew who he was, his perfectly fitted shades aimed on him. "Bishop. Leader of The Twelve," he announced, confirming, pulling off a leather glove and reaching his hand out. "Alerik. Assessor of The Kings."

Bishop shook his hand, surprised with the two-second shake. Maybe not like the Seer. He looked around. "Where is the young lady who made the phone call?"

"My wife," Bishop said, turning and waving her over.

Beth came with discreet hurried steps. Bishop eyed her perfect curves in those jeans and the way the fitted white blouse hugged her sweet tits stirred his jealousy. Her hand was outstretched way before she even got there, smile bright and ever trusting. "Hello," she said as the man shook her hand. Bishop eyed every one of his tattooed fingers on her, feeling the need to count the seconds till he released her. Three. Three very long ones.

His shaded eyes found Bishop, then. "Apologize for the glasses. I have light sensitivities." He regarded the crowd around him. "This must be the remaining Twelve and their wives."

"Yes," Bishop said, seeing he'd done his homework.

He stepped past him with his hand extended for handshaking. Bishop watched him move from person to person, briefly shaking their hand. If he was like Seer, maybe it wasn't so much through touch. Maybe was with his eyes that he hid.

"Interesting," Seer muttered next to him as he moved quickly through the crowd. When he shook Nitro's hand though, Bishop tensed as he held his other fist up and his Ver-thur reached in his coat pocket and handed him a silver looking pen. "I'll need a blood sample from this one," he said.

Nitro looked at Lesion who nodded then presented his hand. He used

the tool on his index finger and then wiped the tip. He leaned a little close to Nitro who kept his fierce eyes on him, not moving a muscle. Was he smelling him? The man brought his fingers to his nose before nodding and reaching out for Felix's hand next. Another not so quick shake before turning to Lesion.

"You must be the alchemist," he said. Lesion gave a single nod as he shook his hand for many seconds before he regarded Tully next to him. "And his lovely wife." Another lengthy shake with her before he made his way back. He finally stopped at Ruckus and shook his hand. Again, he raised his fist and the Ver-thur handed him another tool similar to the first. "One drop of blood to further assess the darkness within you."

Ruckus presented his finger, and he touched the tool on it, wiping the tip and rubbing his two fingers together while staring at him. "Thank you," he muttered before turning to Seer and holding his hand out.

Seer put his hand in his and this shake lasted for nearly a full minute. When their hands parted, the King placed it on his shoulder. "You see," the man said in a questioning, yet knowing tone.

Seer nodded. "I do."

Bishop realized the man was asking if Seer saw something he'd just shown him. Now he was curious.

"My Assessment is complete," Alerik announced to Bishop. You will follow me to my Brothers." He looked around him and made his way to their land dragons, eyeing each of them before looking at Bishop. "Your gift is impeccable."

Gift, huh? Bishop merely nodded with a polite, "Thank you."

"Let's ride," The King said.

"Anything good?" Ivar asked as they drove toward home.

Alerik stroked his beard, staring at the blur of forest. "I have not seen this many gifts in such a proximity outside our domain."

"Anything particularly interesting?"

"Yes. Several things. Nearly all of them need defining, but particularly the one with the heterochromia. His blood has been altered and I sense it's the alchemist responsible."

“What about the dark one?”

“He possesses dark talents but remains untouched due to his gift with mental corridors.”

“Remember who you’re speaking to.”

“Yes, my faithful aide who refuses to educate himself on the particulars of my job.”

“I educate myself on the particulars of protecting you.”

“And how is that *one* percent of your time going?”

“A one percent window can turn into a hundred and if that happens, I’ll be ready to break a sweat.”

Alerik chuckled. “Don’t ever think I count on your defenses to protect me, lover.”

“*Lover*,” Ivar muttered, a grin in his voice, flashing his blue eyes in the mirror. “An interesting word coming out of the mouth of a man without a dick.”

“You and your cock envy,” Alerik said, back to window gazing. “Why do you bind yourself to celibacy when you can’t stop thinking about sex?” Alerik looked in the rear-view mirror, finding his Ver-thur grinning.

“Virtual fucking is *more* than enough for me.”

Should he inform him that he smelled *exactly* like the men they encountered in the world of pleasure? Saturated in the lusts that ruled them? The Ver-thurs were a traditional necessity—weight *entirely* on the *traditional*. Understanding why the Kings struggled with the moving of times and seasons was a question for Nidev, the knower of it all. Perhaps it was time to ask him about the next rebranding update. The last one was over a decade ago. With the upgrades in artificial intelligence, they needed to happen more often. Alerik couldn’t be the only one aware of their outdated social protocols. Most of them could barely function in public without coming across as an alien species not meant for Earth.

He considered the Bishop who was unaware of his mental gifts as much as his wife was unaware of hers. She *surely* needed further defining. A bubble of roiling power raced under her oblivious skin. There was something very... commanding about it, a *look and see* allure that put her at the top of his list to define along with the man bearing the very odd blood. Alerik was accustomed to the smell of all manner of diseases, and he had none of them. And yet the scene was familiar while remaining just out of his pin-pointed

reach.

Samuel had been placed in a mental pocket by himself. He wanted to spend a full day immersed in his gifts. What a spectacular human. The moment they'd locked hands, he allowed him to look around and see whatever he needed to see. He had nothing to hide. With remarkable speed, he'd covered Alerik's entire life, knowing him as he knew himself. He hoped Samuel gave him the same open-book access when it came time for him to see him. Alerik had learned just enough about the man to see he had many undiscovered pockets he wanted to learn.

The other individual he'd put in a special pocket was the *Maggie* girl. Before touching her, he'd smelled the power in her. He made their connection brief, not wanting to get sucked into its vortex but just enough to discern its owner's intent. They were all trustworthy children wielding weapons they didn't understand. Which meant their innocence made them harmlessly dangerous. An oxymoron most prevalent with such gifts.

He was eager to learn what sort of formula Korvexus would come up with to ensure these gifted joined their lineage. It seemed prudent to bring the gifts of the entire Thirteen to obtain that without breaking the free-will code.

Alerik pulled out his phone and began typing out his first report. He'd send it to Vael and Lore and get them salivating. He'd leave it to them to convince Dalk and once he was convinced, the rest would follow and Nidev would be overpowered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bishop held his Petite's hand as they all sat across from twelve of the thirteen kings. Most of them resembled Alerik in general appearance. Was like sitting in a sci-fi movie flick. And they indeed dwelled underground, so they could take that out of the myth column. Mon Dieu, 8-Bit had to be salivating with all the high-tech shit everywhere you looked.

Just who the fuck were these people crossed his mind for the fiftieth time. And where was the thirteenth king?

Bishop had stood and stated their business and now they all waited for a verdict while all the kings stared at hand-held devices. They had excellent poker faces. Not a *one* of them gave away their hand, not even a little, and Bishop was watching closely.

He glanced at Seer who was also watching. What had he seen in the Alerik King when he'd touched him? And was he seeing anything now?

He leaned his ear to his Petite's incoming mouth. "Do you think they're arguing it over?"

He smiled, caressing her face with his hand before whispering back in her ear. "Maybe they are discussing your ass in those jeans that I forbade you to wear."

She stifled a snicker before heating his ear with, "These are *not* the same ones, I threw those in the bayou like you asked."

He eyed her before murmuring, "We'll burn them together when we get back, oui?"

She gave him a huge smile, wrapping her arms around his neck then leaned to his ear again. "What happens if I need the bathroom?"

He pulled back, eyeing her with his brows up. "Do you?" he whispered, the memory of her condition filling him with that unspeakable ecstasy.

She shook her head then gave one of her cute, guilty grimaces. "But

soon maybe.”

They turned when a door at the end of the room slowly slid open, the sound of stone grinding against stone. The kings stood as an averaged sized man made his way to the lone chair or throne in the center of the twelve. “I am Nidev, the Kings’ Conveyor. We’ve reached a decision after careful deliberation. We would like to enter into an agreement with the Twelve Bayou Bishops and their Seer. In exchange for our protection and aid, we request your gifted be further measured and join our lineage. The details of this agreement will now be negotiated. Who will act as negotiator for the Bishops?”

Bishop stood. “I will.”

“King Lore will now enlighten you on The Kings Codes. Then you may make inquiry on anything you wish.”

Bishop sat back down while the third king from the left stood and prepared to divulge the answer to that burning question they all had—who the *fuck* were these people?

“Ladies and gentlemen, we stand before you as the Creole Kings,” he announced, his voice rich and commanding. “Anointed protectors and mentors of those who carry within them the gifts of the divine. We are the seekers and guardians of extraordinary human talents, and it is our duty, our purpose, to find these gifted individuals and shield them from the corrupting influences of the world and from those who would seek to misuse their extraordinary abilities.

“Our role extends beyond mere protection; we are educators and guides. We provide wisdom, training, and the sanctity of space, allowing these talents to mature and flourish.

“Furthermore, our endeavor is to weave these divine threads through the tapestry of humanity, to ensure that these gifts are not lost but are instead perpetuated through generations. Our efforts in pairing those with similar talents, though met with limited success, continue with unwavering commitment. We believe that through careful guidance and stewardship, we can foster a lineage enriched by these divine endowments.

“In our pursuit, the Kings remain apart – observers and shepherds abstaining from the distractions of worldly passions and desires. We see ourselves not just as kings but as the eternal custodians of a legacy that bridges the mortal and the celestial.

“In this solemn duty, we invite collaboration, insight, and unity. Our vision is not merely for the present but for a future where these divine gifts are an integral, harmonious part of the human experience. And as custodians of the divine spark, we invite you to partake in a journey of discovery, growth, and mastery at our Sanctum. Here, under the guidance of the Creole Kings and our esteemed faculty, you will explore the depths of your abilities, learn to harness them for the greater good, and walk the path that the divine has set for you.

“In addition to studying and learning your gifts, we require that each gifted individual be assigned a mentor from among the Creole Kings for personalized guidance. Further necessary requirements are weekly lessons on the ethical use of your abilities. Also, physical and mental training to ensure that body and mind are in harmony with your gifts. And finally, participating in projects and missions that utilize your gifts for the betterment of society.”

That King sat and the thirteenth one stood again. “Any questions?”

Only a hundred. “Can we have a minute to discuss?” Bishop asked.

“We will take a thirty-minute recess and reconvene.”

The kings all stood and left the room and Bishop turned to find his crew immediately in heated conversations full of various forms of *holy shits*. He eyed Hurricane talking with Shank while Spar, Traps and Bacon listened. He made his way past the group of women to the rest now turned in their seat listening to Kaj and Bullets.

“What are we all thinking?” Bishop wondered.

Bullets regarded him. “Well, for one, not all of us are gifted and he only mentioned protection for the Twelve and the Seer, not the common morons of the marsh.”

“We’ll ask how far that goes,” Bishop said as the women joined them.

“How often is this school?” Maggie wondered, appearing excited. “I mean, I like everything they said but I wouldn’t want to be away from Spook more than I need to.”

“And are *all* the gifted *required* to join, or is this optional?” Beth wondered.

“I hope I’m gifted,” Tully whispered, her smile bright. “I would love to go to a school like this. Then I could help Lesion in all his science adventures.”

This brought Lesion’s smile and his lips to her forehead.

“What’s this mentor thing?” Spook wondered. “Each student has to have one of the Kings as one? What does that exactly involve?”

Yeah, Bishop had wondered the very same thing. Again, he said, “We’ll ask that too.”

“I love the idea of using my gifts for something useful,” Maggie said, looking at him.

“I know you do, baby,” he murmured quietly. “And I would love to see that too, just want to know every detail.”

“Did I hear right that the kings are celibate?” Beth wondered.

“You heard correctly,” Kaj said. “Not an uncommon thing for the kind of priests these men seem to be.”

“Priests of gifts?” Nitro said.

“Wonder what he meant by their unsuccessful efforts of pairing the gifted together,” Bishop remembered.

“Right,” Beth said. “I like that they invited collaboration and insight.”

Bishop heard it in her tone, looking at her. “What are you seeing Ma Petite?”

“Well...I just think it’s interesting. And wondering if their lack of success in pairing gifted people has anything to do with...what did he call it? Apart? Abstaining from the distractions of passion and desire?” She grimaced at this. “How can you possibly succeed in something you have only head knowledge about? We all know relationships don’t work that way.”

The married men readily agreed.

“Maybe we can have class swaps,” Hurricane said. “Our gifted go to their classes and learn shit and their gifted come to ours and learn shit. Win, win.”

“Oh, I like that idea,” Beth said, excited. “What?” she wondered at Bishop’s head shake.

“It’s not enough you’re match-making the entire side of our bayou?” he teased. “You want to fix all the people in the north too?”

She took him seriously. “I just want to help people,” she pled. “It’s what I went to college for,” like she needed to remind him which made him chuckle.

Seer leaned in and they all turned. “They want us to attend classes which I personally think is a fine thing for those who want that. But Belle Eveque is correct about what they lack. The King I shook hands with allowed

me to see everything I wanted to see. And I wanted to see everything. And I saw he has absolutely *no* concept of passion and desire, the kind we experience with our wives. Belle Eveque is entirely correct about them being unequipped to pair people but more interesting than that, they themselves are lacking something that would unlock their full potential. I speak from experience.”

“I can vouch for that,” Maggie whispered. “Since with Spook, my gifts have changed in a growing way.”

“Well, I’m not a gifted King,” Bullets said, “but if I was, and I heard *unlocking power*, you’d have my attention.”

“The biggest question is how far does their protection go,” Kaj said. “And as a priest of my people, I can say that these men will likely not run swiftly into the arms of this type of intimacy.”

“So don’t mention it’s for them,” Beth whispered. “They’re teachers. They would just be observing others and getting better equipped to do what they do.”

“More head knowledge, Ma Petite?” he reminded her.

“Not if I have hands-on experiences to exercise what you’ve learned.” Bishop chuckled.

“What?” she cried, innocently. “What they’re doing is pretty amazing I think, and I’d like to help with that.”

“We all love your tenacity for the love-making, Belle Eveque,” Shank said, looking awkward as fuck trying to be nice. “But maybe we can focus on putting out these swamp fires over here,” he pointed to his left, “before lighting these others here,” he pointed on his right.

She gave a sigh before conceding to the wisdom with a sweet, “Right, right. Of course.”

“How much do we *actually* need these people again?” Traps wondered.

“Well, we’ve got over two hundred Vickis planning a *war* in the swamp and when they learn what I did to their wife-beater and what we plan to do to his other three brothers, they’ll wanna have a party sooner rather than later.”

“What you do?” Shank wondered, lustily.

“Nothing I want to say in front of the women,” Bullets assured.

“Do we even know if these Kings have the manpower to meet that

threat?” Nitro wondered.

“Another question we’ll need to ask,” Bishops said.

“Don’t forget about the Noctambule lead Bart just found,” 8-Bit said.

“What Noctambule lead?” Seer said, his tone going pitch black.

“Kaj mentioned the name of their so-called holy person at Vickis clan and Bart recognized that name in all that shit they reported on at that one meeting last week.”

“I would not be surprised to learn that,” Kaj said. “We’ve seen what regard they have for their women.”

“We surely need to find that out,” Bishop said.

“These Kings *must* have connections,” 8-Bit said. “You don’t have all this shit I’m seeing here and not have connections.”

“That just means we need them more,” Bishops muttered. “I was hoping to tip the scales the other way.”

“We have plenty to tip the scales,” Seer assured. “I don’t need divine sight to see that what they do here means *everything* to them.”

“This is true,” Kaj concurred, again seeming to speak out of some kind experience. “Any kind of power-up with gifts is our biggest leverage going.”

“Then we keep that as our ace in the hole,” Bishop thought.

“I can guarantee they want it,” Seer whispered. “I just can’t guarantee what all they’re willing to do for it.” He looked at Beth. “And I *see* that ball ending up in her court.”

“Yes!” Maggie whispered. “You can use your *compelling!*”

She erupted in eye-rolling sputters, whispering, “It’s *not* compelling, it’s simple facts!”

“We all love you dearly, Belle Eveque,” Seer said. “But with you, it’s not just facts, it’s much more. It’s faith and facts. And that’s a powerful combo.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Bishop asked, needing a final. “Find out how far the protection goes. Find out what goes into that protection. Find out everything required of our gifted, all the particulars.”

“I got it,” Spook muttered, getting their attention. “They mentioned having to protect the gifts from being misused. The Noctambule would fall into that category. Gifts being misused?”

“Yes,” Seer assured.

“*And* that priest in my sister’s wicked clan,” Kaj realized.

“Now, *that’s* good,” Bullets said.

Shank added, “This would put them on our side with some of those other fires we’re dealing with.”

“Indeed,” the Seer muttered. “The fires that started it all.”

“The fire that merged our paths,” Beth whispered, solemnly.

“A divine fingerprint in the ashes of a wicked blaze,” Seer mused, amazed.

Maggie leaned in and kissed Spook, both of them seeing the other as that divine fingerprint the same way he saw Beth and she no doubt saw him.

“I think Fate has already rolled the dice,” Bacon said, like a prophet out of nowhere. “And we’re about to find out what she rolled.”

Vael eyed the huddled group on the screen while he listened to his brothers discuss the shocking verdict of these Bishops. He didn’t recall in all their years ever being propositioned in such a way as this. He wondered which of the Bishops’ gifted had realized just how much leverage they had with the Kings. Maybe all of them. Maybe none of them. Maybe their sloppy method of deduction and absence of rank found its own way, just as Vael often believed it would. But the kings never had the nerve to allow for such a reckless method in their work. Fascinating how they used that very method with many things but not with the one needing that exact reckless intervention. In their match-making program, they used the best of their gifts in repeated failure. Lore called it humbling. Vael called it embarrassing. And the more of their gifts they applied to the problem, the worse it seemed to get. They were now micro-managing every aspect of their couple’s lives, even forbidding intercourse until they passed certain markers. Because producing offspring from mal-formed relationships was absolutely forbidden after observing disaster even when providing them with a scientifically impeccable upbringing. This led to the most recent theory. The health of the couple’s relationship was the first critical step to master before attempting offspring.

The issue with all of it was in one word. Theory. That was all they

really had. He was the only lunatic genius demanding radical propositions like trusting the natural process. But what happened today went beyond that. It went to the very heart of the issue.

But the shocking revelation was realizing the problem wasn't their solutions, it was them. What were her exact words? *"How does one properly teach or even direct what they don't have first-hand knowledge of? To know something with the mind is necessary, yes, but without experiencing what you know, you can never fully understand, and therefore never fully teach. I'm not sure how that one escaped you when you have workshops for the gifts in order for the student to fully come to understand them."*

If he'd not been cemented in shock, he might have applauded. She'd continued in her reckless momentum gracefully bulldozing through eons of tradition, particularly the one that put the fire in the heated debates now happening among them. She had not suggested they personally take mates—which was a wise move, intentional or not—but that they should at least understand those dynamics if they were to ever be successful in the matter they were failing at.

She'd opened the door. One he never dreamed would ever be opened but she blew it off the hinges with her proposition. *"So, we accept your invitation to develop our gifts. And I accept your invitation to collaborate on areas such as this. Working together, we can turn the elite failing matchmakers into successful ones by using your very own humanity to unlock the dormant powers within each of you."*

And then, with a simple, innocent smile, she plunged them through with words that rung with prophetic power: *"Who is to say that the Kings themselves are not destined to produce heirs of the world's greatest prodigies?"*

Their courts had never experienced such an immediate and absolute disruption as her words caused. They'd just barely managed to excuse themselves before further wrecking their precious and esteemed reputations.

The one question he had was in regard to their role in producing the world's greatest prodigies. Was she implying they accomplish this as teachers? Or students? And was he the only one wondering that?

He turned his attention to the discussion when it focused on the kings changing such a long-standing tradition, waiting to be called on to give his opinion. Then he realized everybody was talking out of turn and added his

opinion loud enough to be heard. “I vote yes,” he said, opening the door for his brothers.

“I second his vote,” Lore said with great weight.

“And just what is this vote, exactly?” Nidev begged, his anger barely restrained.

It was Korvex that rose to answer, shocking everybody. “To become true guardians and give not just our minds but our flesh to the divine will. You know this is correct, you felt the power of truth in her words. We all did.”

Nidev tried another angle, “We all know the flesh does not conform to the divine in the same way—”

“Then we make it conform,” Vael cut in. “If we can train our flesh to abstain for the good of the celestial will, then we can train it to conform to that very same will.”

“I agree,” Dalk said.

Vael’s blood energized with that vote. With Dalk on board, the rest of them would follow. It was all but done with only the particulars to work out.

“And regarding that for which they originally sought us out,” Dalk added. “I suggest we accompany them to the clan where the official challenge is being made to ensure they understand the nature of this deal. As well as investigate the Vikings claim of misused power with their village priest.”

Mia spent all day with Kaj hunting and not once did she ask about her Mirror Man. It was the hardest thing she’d ever done but decided it was important that she did as Jericho asked her and truly spread her wings. If he knew how much she thought about him, he might say she needed longer time to stretch her wings. She was thrilled to hear how much Kaj liked Jericho and she waited for details he accidentally dropped during conversations. She had a right to be concerned about what was coming with her ex-clan and asking questions about that was acceptable. She’d learned quite a bit of interesting things—the Creole Viking Kings being the most peculiar and fascinating. To think such a people even existed much less in their northern swamps. Kaj had joined the Bishops in a meeting with them the day before and with all her strength she did not inquire about it other than to ask if she was safe. The answer was she was very safe. The Creole Kings had taken an interest in the

Bishops, and decided to join with them in standing against her cruel clan. This was indeed good news since the war rumors seemed to be growing.

“Jericho asked how you were doing,” Kaj said, stealing Mia’s pulse from her body for two whole seconds.

“Oh? And what did you tell him?” she asked, adding another stick to the fire, and adjusting the meat spicket.

“That you are filling your days with a hundred things to stay busy.”

“And stretching my wings,” she reminded in a hurry.

He smiled, staring at the fire with a nod. “Yes, to stretch your wings.”

“This is what he asked me to do, and I’m doing it.”

“And how do you like it? This wing stretching. You find anything you want to do with your life yet?”

She gave a light gasp and sat on her blanket across from him, happy to not be in the usual woman’s clothes but those of a hunter. The soft leather pants were much more practical and comfortable as were the lovely leather boots Kaj gave her as a hunting gift. “It’s only been three days.”

“Maybe you want to be a huntress who lives alone in the forest. Or leave the swamp and go to the city? Perhaps attend a school?”

She shook her head. “I love the swamps and I will never leave them.” She smiled at the fire. “Now... a huntress...” She nodded. “I like the sound of that.”

She eyed him, loving his big laugh. “You are an amazing hunter. Does Jericho know of your hunting skills?”

She shrugged, his name causing a collision in her body. “He knows I can defend myself. He was very angry about it.”

“That you can defend yourself?”

She barely shook her head while gazing at the fire, wrapping her arms around her pulled up knees. “That I did not use these skills to protect myself.”

She saw his nod in her side vision. “He doesn’t understand the culture,” Kaj said softly.

She smiled a little, happy that he didn’t get angry but understood why she hadn’t protected herself.

“They took advantage of your goodness,” he said, his tone going low. “But we will avenge you and reclaim your honor.”

“I wish...we could just...pass like the wind and not look back.”

He reached with a stick and stirred the coals. “Some sins must be cut out, sister. Or they spread to the innocent. We are responsible to stop this wickedness from continuing into the generations.”

She considered his words for many seconds. “This is the same truth like the sun on the water,” she realized. The sound of the fire popped and crackled as she stared.

“This makes you sad, sister?” he asked.

She held her gaze on the gentle flames, her head nodding on its own. “I do not like pain, brother. Not for anybody. But especially not for the little ones. So...I understand and am grateful for such a wise brother.” She met his blue gaze over the light of the fire. “I hope you can teach me to be this kind of warrior.”

“I will surely teach you everything I know. But you must learn to never allow a man to hurt you like that again. No matter what.”

She lowered her gaze, nodding. “Jericho says this. And I promise I will learn it.”

A scream brought Kaj to his feet and running toward the bayou where it seemed to come from.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” a woman yelled.

He spotted two women and panic sent him sprinting harder at seeing one of them in the water with an alligator. Without stopping, Kaj leapt into the water, drawing his blade while he was still airborne. He landed seconds before the gator thrashed and took her under for a death spin.

The girl on land screamed and Kaj dove underwater, struggling to locate the kill-spot at the base of the beast’s skull without accidentally stabbing the woman. She seemed to be holding it from behind but if the gator had any part of her in its jaws, it could rip it from her body. He came up and the underbelly of the gator appeared. Kaj plunged his knife and yanked it downward, spilling its guts into the water.

The victim shot up out of the water with a gasp, stumbling and looking at the alligator in shock then at him.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, breathless.

He recognized anger on her face as she looked from the alligator to

him. “What the *hell*? Are you crazy? I was *wrangling* this gator!”

Wrangling?

“You just killed it!” she cried.

“It took you under,” he said, puzzled with her reaction.

“Did you *not* see I had him subdued? Till you charged in and caused him to nearly *kill me!*?”

“I heard a scream,” he said as the woman slapped the water and made her way to land, fully clothed.

“That was me, I was freaking out,” the girl on land said. “She was teaching me how to wrangle cuz I’m supposed to have to rope a gator soon.”

“Even if I was in trouble, you don’t just jump in like that! If my leg or arm was in his jaws, he woulda likely ripped it right off!”

Kaj made his way out of the water, his mind replaying the event, finding exactly what she said in his memory. But in his defense, how often did you encounter a woman *wrangling* an alligator?

He turned when she removed her shirt and slung it on the ground.

“Now you’re bashful? That’s cute,” she muttered, angry.

“I’m Tegan,” the other girl said. Kaj realized Mia was there.

“I’m Mia. We were hunting not far from here and we heard a scream. Are you the Marsh Queen that wrestles the great serpents?”

The angry one answered, “I don’t know what you just said but I’m Juliette Bishop. Apologies for my rudeness honey, your...whoever he is got me all in a twist.”

The Tegan girl added kindly, “Juliette is the sister of the people who run these swamps.”

“Wait a *damn* minute,” the angry one said.

Kaj kept his head lowered, aware she was still not dressed.

“Are you one of them *Vikings* that like to beat women up?”

“My brother does not beat women,” Mia said. “He’s a priest.”

The girl snorted. “A priest, huh? What, you hear the confessions of those women beaters and just let ’em go on doin’ them?” she accused. “That ain’t holy, bubba,” she informed. “That is wicked. In fact, I *wish* one of them so-called *men* would come to this side of the swamp and try that with me,” she said. “I’d crush *twelve* generations in their balls if I could find them.”

“I’d hold him down for you,” Kaj assured as Mia’s words returned to him. *Marsh Queen that wrestles the great serpents. Sister of the Bayou*

Bishops. He wanted to look at her again for a resemblance, but the glow of her white flesh still filled his peripheral.

“Now I ain’t got a damn thing to wear,” she muttered as though just realizing.

Kaj removed his outer robe and handed it to her, keeping his eyes averted.

“I ain’t wearing nothing from a *Viking*,” she swore.

The other girl snatched it from him. “Thank you, sir,” she said, then whispered loudly, “Just *put* the dadgum thing on! Mother of mercy, you are somethin’!”

“Fine, but I’ll burn it after,” she muttered, making him want to laugh.

“She’ll do no such thing,” the Tegan girl said. “I’ll wash it and return it to you. You must be the *other* Vikings that are *nice*,” she stressed at the girl. “I was the one with Dr. Patches who found the hurt girl in the woods.”

“I remember you,” Mia said.

Tegan gasped. “That was you? Holy moley, you look hella different! I didn’t even recognize you.”

“This is Kaj, my brother from my mother’s clan. He is helping Jericho...I mean Bullets bring the men who hurt me to justice.”

Kaj finally looked at the angry one, finding her fierce green eyes on him while his mind replayed the alligator rescue scenario. So she was *wrangling* it. He was suddenly very curious about her methods and fascinated that she was able.

“What are you looking at,” she barely said, sitting on the ground and removing her boots. He realized all her anger was nearly absent from the question.

“I guess The Marsh Queen that wrestles great serpents,” he said. “I’m sorry to say I have not heard of you.”

“Sorry why?” she asked, aiming her gaze at him, looking for something to fight with him about.

“Maybe I would have sought you out to learn such a skill. What is the purpose of...wrangling alligators?” he wondered.

She worked her wet socks off, revealing slender feet before slapping them next to her. “Money. Tourists. Charity. All of the above, depends on the time of year.”

“So, you’re not hunting them?”

She stood and turned, and he heard a zipper. Her pants were at her ankles now and he tried to turn away but instead stared at her slender, muscled calves.

“Like what you see, *Priest?*”

“Why are you being so mean,” Tegan wondered in a quiet scold. “The man came flying in here like Geronimo to save you.”

“Did I need saving?” she hissed, like he couldn’t hear.

“And how the *heck* he’d know that, I’d like to dadgum know. Hell, even knowin’ what you were doing I thought you was gonna *die!*”

Kaj met the mean ones gaze and he found the fight in her eyes alluring. “What if I do?” he carefully wondered, tickled over her being the little sister of the Bishops.

“What if you do what?” she wondered, forgetting her question.

“Like what I see,” he said, unable to stop his grin at the disgust in her pretty face. “Our Priests are not forbidden the intimacy of a woman.”

“Ohhhh,” she said, accusation heavy in her voice that was both strong and musical. “You’re one of *them* priests.”

Them priests? He considered what sort of priests she’d be familiar with. “It’s not our custom to forbid marrying.”

His explanation seemed to earn him more scathing judgment. “So, you got a *wife*, oh great looker at other females?”

He let his laugh go at that expression, shaking his head. “No, I do not.”

“So, what, the priests get all the women they want? That how it works? No marriage required?”

“I have never been with a woman, Marsh Queen,” he said, ready to end her accusing assumptions. “I am not like the wicked men you seem accustomed to. Do you always judge all men the same?”

“No, I do not,” she snapped. “Only the idiot ones that nearly get me killed while I’m wrangling gators.” She held his robe closed over her nakedness, kicking the wet ones aside before getting back to her eye assault, raking his body with a scathing scrutiny before returning to his gaze. The blazing hell-fire suddenly simmered to judgment on standby.

Mia gasped and hurried behind the women and Kaj turned. His blood froze then boiled at finding three Vikings from Mia’s ex-clan, walking toward them.

“Who the hell is that?” Tegan muttered.

“Marsh Queen, take my sister away from here. I will find her when I’m done.” Kaj made his way toward the men, wondering what they were doing on that side of the swamp, especially after the Creole Kings personally visited them and delivered Battle-Kin’s official challenge.

He put his hand on the hilt of his knife, preparing for the worst.

“I don’t want to leave my brother,” Juliette heard Mia whisper behind her when they got to the boat.

She turned. “He told me to take you out of here,” she reminded, not sure why she even obliged him. Oh yeah. The three giant men that wore murder glares on their faces. She wasn’t afraid to fight but she didn’t want that girl getting hurt again on account of her stubbornness.

“I’m not afraid of them,” Mia said. “And will not run, but fight.”

“Oh boy,” Tegan said to Juliette. “What kind of look is that in your eye?”

“It’s a look that says damn right you don’t run or fear them bastards.” Juliette eyed Mia. “You think they might try something dirty with your brother?”

Mia seemed sure of it and nodded, worried.

“Where are you going?” Tegan hissed as Juliette headed back the way they came.

Mia caught up to her and said, “I need my weapons. Our camp is just that way. I can get them, and we can circle behind them.”

Juliette nodded then looked at Tegan, realizing she didn’t want to drag her into any trouble. “Go wait in the boat.”

“What?” she balked, shaking her head. “Hell no.”

Juliette pointed at her. “I tried. Make sure they know that if something happens.”

“This way,” Mia said, hurrying.

Juliette followed with Tegan behind them. “Did you *not* see the size of those men?”

She did. She also couldn’t get her brother’s face out of her head. Or all those muscles. And tattoos covering those high-definition arms and the

body poorly hidden beneath that tattered excuse for a shirt he wore. And magical mercies, the thick, masculine, *mouthwatering* smell on his robe had her feeling like a bitch in heat, ready to fuck a Viking priest. And that made her feel like she was robbing the cradle for some reason. Whatever the reason, it came without a lick of guilt or shame as she crept her way back.

Never been with a woman? Was that supposed to turn her insides out?

Juliette eyed the hatchet and knife the girl added to her person, very curious about their girl now. If she knew how to use those, why the hell was she beaten?

They weren't twenty-steps in when Kaj met them in the woods.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. Even while not directing it at her, his thick, hard tone made everything race in her blood. Lord, he had the deepest sexiest voice. And that *accent*. What would sexy time words sound like in it?

"I didn't want to leave you," Mia whispered.

He stepped around her, looking right at Juliette and she could only wonder what he was seeing on her face while she did her best to meet that fierce gaze with her own. His anger almost instantly settled down and her pulse cut loose like a scattershot, bringing her breath of relief. She didn't want that one angry at her. For many reasons.

"I'll escort both of you back," he said, holding her stare as he passed.

She came unglued from her spot and followed him. "We have a boat and don't need all that," Juliette said.

"It's not safe," he muttered, kicking dirt on their fire. "Pack up," he said to his sister.

Juliette found herself not wanting to argue with him. She *wanted* him to escort her back. There was a lot she wanted to find out about him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kaj gave Bishop the news the three warriors had delivered him, not the least surprised with his wrath and even sharing it. “They will not win,” Kaj said. “Not if we have the Creole Kings fighting with us.”

“Still boils my blood that they’d fucking dare utter that challenge. Makes me want *all* their fucking balls on a Styrofoam plate. This swamp belongs to the Bayou *Bishops* and they will *surely* never take it.”

Kaj and all his warriors would give their lives to ensure that.

“You and your sister will stay the night here in one of the guest houses. Mah-Mah is eager to meet Mia and shower her with all the bath-house luxuries she makes.” Bishop put his hand on Kaj’s shoulder. “And thank you for protecting my sister.”

“Battle-Kin and I are blood brothers. That extends to all his people.”

“Battle-Kin?”

“The one known as Bullets. Although, the fiery Angry One doesn’t need protection.”

Bishop laughed. “She give you a hard time?”

Kaj recounted how they met and chuckled at how funny he found that. “Oui.” He led him out the large building he referred to as The Basilique. “Ah, there’s the Angry One now.”

Kaj’s blood stirred at the sight of her walking toward them. She wore a white dress that left much of her tanned skin open to his gaze. The habit of looking away from such things was broken and he all but devoured the curves of the silky lithe body beneath the dress.

“No introductions needed,” Bishop said. “You mind showing Kaj and his sister to a guest house? They’ll stay the night.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you Ma Petite,” he said, kissing her forehead. “You’re in good hands with the Angry One,” he called over his shoulder with a chuckle.

He looked at Juliette and found one of her slender, dark brows raised at him. “Angry one, huh? Follow me, Geronimo.”

Geronimo. What was this name he wanted to know as he watched the Bishops’ beautiful sister lead the way. Her hair was down, and the dark color was new to him. And alluring.

“This is it,” she said, climbing the small porch that held a swing. She opened the door and turned on the light. “The living room obviously. Kitchen there,” she pointed, opening a door on the right. “Bedroom number one.” She nodded at the other door across from it. “Bedroom number two there.” She opened another door. “Bathroom. Everything you need is in it.” She turned and faced him. “I’m washing your robe. Soon as it’s done, I’ll return it to you.” Her gaze lowered on him. “I’m sure I can find a change of clothes for you if you want.”

“Thank you, but I’ll wash these myself.”

She nodded and glanced around and Kaj again broke the habit of not looking and stared at the column of her neck up to where her strong, determined jaw met it. “Well, if you need anything, let me know.” She turned those full lips and they imprisoned his gaze, the slight tug on the edge a powerful spell on his body. “I’ll be in the little house next to this one.”

He broke free of her mouth only to fall into her dark green gaze.

“Thank you,” she said, her dark lashes lowering to golden silky cheeks. “For helping me when you thought I was in trouble. And...” She turned her head and put her hair behind a delicate ear. “I’m sorry for being mean.”

She turned and he followed her out, not ready for her to leave yet. “Thank you for not killing me.”

She gave a sharp laugh and he smiled at the musical sound. “Real funny. Thank you for not stabbing me,” she said, making him laugh now.

“I would never. Not even if you were my greatest enemy and held my life in your hands.”

“Oh really,” she said, sounding doubtful, crossing her arms on the first step. “Probably because you wouldn’t need a knife to do that.”

He turned and looked at the swing. “Is this safe for me to sit on?”

“Should be. If it breaks though, I’m not rescuing you.”

He grinned and sat on it. “So far so good. Come tell me all about how to wrangle an alligator, Angry One.”

She gave another musical laugh and made her way to the swing and

sat. "Not something you tell, really. It's something you have to show and tell."

"Okay. Show me," he said.

She eyed him with raised brows. "Need a gator for that."

He turned his smile to the air before him. "My middle name is gator."

He looked at her when she laughed real big, mesmerized by her beauty again. "That ain't quite the same, Cajun."

Cajun. He'd heard that term before in the French culture. He liked her calling him that. "You think I can't be as vicious as a gator?"

"Ohhh, no, honey, I actually know you can. But as a priest, I'm pretty sure you don't want some woman mounting you like I'd have to."

All the dormant lust in his virgin body burst to life as he envisioned her mounting him. "Not *some* woman, no. But maybe for the slayer of great serpents, I would make an exception."

"Awww, you're being cute," she said, lightly.

"You think?"

She sat there, crossing her arms over her chest. "So... were you serious when you said you never had a woman?"

He shook his head slowly. "Never."

"In all your life," she double checked, sounding doubtful. Or was it hopeful.

"All my life," he assured.

"We... call that a virgin," she said then gasped lightly. "Don't know why I said that," she whispered.

He grinned at his lap. "I'm aware of the term."

"So, you don't seem...embarrassed by that. At all," she said, like that was odd.

"Should I be?" he wondered, puzzled at that idea.

"No," she said, her voice like silk in his ears. "Not at all, of course not. I think...it's...amazing."

"What about you, Wrangler?"

He felt her eyes on him and turned, letting the green pools take him prisoner. "What about me?" she wondered, her voice still silky.

"Have you ever had a man?"

She broke the spell and looked down in her lap. He waited, wondering over the long delay. "I have," she finally said.

Hearing the sadness and regret in her voice brought the urge to touch

her. He dared to, a single finger along her shoulder. "I might not want to know why this makes you sad."

She raised her eyes to his. "Why?"

He realized his touch did things to her, none he wanted to stop as he slid his finger on the warm silk of her skin. "Because," he began, gliding it to her neck. "Maybe I'll want to kill them."

She let out a gasp and closed her eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks and the vulnerable sight stabbed his chest.

"Wrangler," he said softly, moving his thumb over her cheek. "It doesn't matter if there was zero men or a thousand. None of that could ever touch your beauty and worth."

She grabbed his hand in both of hers and held it against her chest with her eyes closed, locking up his muscles. The feel of her ragged breaths had him needing to act in ways he didn't know how to navigate.

"Lord, I want you more than anything I've ever wanted, but I swear to God, I don't trust myself."

Her hot confession rocked him with a startling power, leaving him speechless.

"Oh God, what have I done." She shot off the swing and his lightening reflexes caught her wrist.

"Don't leave."

She stood there, looking away from him.

He tugged a little and she returned, sitting slowly at the edge of the seat. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm...way too desperate."

The idea of her desperate for anything was surprising. "For what?"

She held the edge of the swing with her hands. "Everything?" she finally said.

He realized he was meeting the little girl hiding behind the tough woman. "Tell me what everything is, beautiful Wrangler."

She lifted her shoulder a little and dropped it. "What if...it happens again?"

"What does?" he gently pried.

"What if I...read everything wrong and I'm tricked again? Or I'm stupid and blind to the truth because I want something so badly?"

"You are smart and strong. You learn quickly, I think?"

"Then what if I'm so scared to fail that I don't take another chance?"

"You will," he said, sure of that as he was sure he didn't want her to.

“You don’t even know me. I come off as strong, but...”

He couldn’t resist touching her shoulder again. “You are strong,” he said. “Strong and yet soft like silk. This combination is rare and very beautiful.” He felt her skin tighten as though chilled. “Come closer Pretty Wrangler so I can warm you.”

She shook her head. “I...I can’t,” she said, breathless. “I told you I want you too much.”

“You did,” he said, his heart pounding in his chest to hear it again.

Her sharp breath rushed out. “And you didn’t say a thing.”

“What do you want to hear?”

She snapped her face to him, her anger lighting him up in strange ways. “Why, so you can know exactly how to get me to...” She closed her eyes and looked away. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know you’re not like that.”

“What do you want to hear?” he tried again.

“How it made you feel,” she forced out, the muscles in her arms flexing as she gripped the swing again.

“It was the most profound thing I’ve ever experienced with words. My body forgot how to breathe for ten seconds, and my blood rushed to forbidden places.”

She gave a light snort. “So, it made you want sex?”

“I told you that’s not forbidden, Pretty Wrangler.”

She went quiet and he realized her leg bounced lightly. “So, you mean...the same places I’m protecting?”

“Yes. Your heart. And soul. And spirit. Sex is... a secondary matter.”

“With a primary power,” she added with great emphasis.

“I can’t argue with you.”

“Because you don’t know,” she said, her matter-of-factness making him hungry and then angry that she’d learned that with another.

“No, I do not.”

“You might change your mind.”

Her assurance caused a roiling in his blood, not all good. “Maybe I might. I have much to learn with that. But something tells me it’ll be a very quick lesson.”

“I’m sure you have a million women willing to teach you.”

“Hardly. But surely fifty.”

“That’s what I meant,” she fussed lightly. “You could snap your

fingers and they'd come running, I'd imagine."

"Why do you imagine?"

She rolled her head toward him and glared him down. "Do not screw with me. You know why."

"Because I'm a leader," he was sure. Until she gave one single laugh. "And powerful."

"You're getting closer."

"I'm kind? Understanding? I listen?"

She turned fully now, her stupefied look making him grin. "Holy moly. Word never got back to you that you're drop dead gorgeous and hotter than hell?"

He had to laugh as his blood went to that place she'd first meant. "Nobody would dare tell their Priest such things."

"Oh, duh," she remembered. "I can assure you they're thinking it. A lot. Every day. Maybe every second of every day."

He wanted to laugh but he was too busy wondering. "Is this what you think about me?"

"Geeze, you do not assume the obvious things, do you?" she said, her eyes wide but not on him.

"Assumptions can be dangerous."

"The answer is an emphatic yes, Kajun. I do think you are the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and I will probably be thinking about you a lot. Every day."

"And every second?" he asked, wanting that one too.

She gave a sweet offensive gasp. "You want every drop of my pride?"

"Every single drop, yes."

"Well, it's yours, Viking," she muttered, forcing them to swing with her nervous feet. "Happy now?"

"Extremely."

She nodded. "Now I'm done for. I'm on your altar, naked and open and at your mercy."

"Min Gooth," he muttered, his manhood gaining more blood than his brain.

She regarded him. "What does that mean?"

He smiled at her, seeing she had no idea what her words did to him.

"It means my God. I say this when circumstances are dire."

She gave him a musical laugh. "What did I say that made everything

dire?”

“Something about you naked and open on my altar.”

The reckless hammer in his manhood tripled at the surprise on her face then look in her eyes that she quickly hid from him.

“I didn’t...mean it literal!” she said, her breathless words not helping him.

“I didn’t mean to see them as such. But I did. And Min Gooth,” he repeated with more pain, getting her nervous laugh as he allowed himself to gaze on that mental image with a need to compare fact with this fantasy burning his mind.

“You...put people on altars?” she wondered, the question making him laugh.

“I don’t,” he assured, baffled that he’d projected such a thing. “Ever.”

“But you...just did,” she reminded him.

“I did,” he confirmed, aroused by everything happening. “You’ve already gotten in one of the forbidden places,” he realized.

She let out a breath that got him curious.

“What?”

“I didn’t mean it.”

He considered that, knowing it wasn’t entirely true. “Maybe you meant to a little.”

She glanced his way and the vulnerable way she rubbed her arms had him boiling to soothe and touch her. “Maybe...a little.”

“Would you?” he suddenly needed to know.

“What?” She finally gave those pretty green eyes back to him.

“Give yourself to me. Naked and open on my altar.”

“L-litreally?” she stammered, breathless again.

“Yes,” he dared.

She eyed him for many seconds. “Depends on what you intended to do.”

He considered that. “That depends on what you’re giving.”

She brought a shine to her lips with a sweep of her tongue. “What if... I was only giving you the...physical things?”

He held her gaze tightly, hoping she didn’t break it. “Then I would not accept it.”

The silence was filled with her screaming thoughts he prayed she gave voice to. “What...would you accept?”

“Every single bit. Or not a *single* bit.”

“Mercy,” she whispered, out of breath. “Not even...a...tiny taste?”

“I will not taste what I cannot devour.”

“Oh,” she gasped, the sound desperate and tiny as she turned her eyes forward. “I may have...fantasized about...that kind of bondage.”

Bondage. The word didn't fit in the scenario playing out in his mind. “Explain what you mean by...bondage.”

She glanced at him, curiously confused. “Like...tied up? Aren't...sacrifices...tied?”

“Min Gooth,” he whispered, her words changing the images in his mind to ones that brought fire in his lungs and a brutal ache in his cock. She'd fantasized about such a thing?

“All sacrifices are a willing gift. Restraints are not necessary.” But they were now.

“I mean...I would permit you to tie me,” she gasped, twisting her fingers in her lap. “That's...a gift too. Trusting you to...protect me when I'm helpless.”

“I have never touched a woman, but in this very second my mind swears I have.”

She regarded him, hesitant with worried brows. “Have you?”

“I have,” he said.

He caught her when she shot off the swing and this time pulled her into his lap. He bound her in his arms, putting his mouth next to her huffing face turned away from him. “I have a very powerful mind. And I surely had a woman on my altar. Naked and open. Then bound while I took everything from her that she gave me. And she gave me everything,” he said hotly.

She turned and pressed her lips against his and the soft hot silk sent a million bolts of heat through him. “Pretty Wrangler,” he breathed in her mouth, holding her face tightly so he could have what he wanted. The feel of her tongue along his and the blast of her hunger hit his cock like a wrecking ball of fire. He stopped her from lowering her dress, his breath ragged.

“Never where other eyes could see you.” He took her face again and pulled her mouth to his, taking without asking. “I will only take everything, Juliette. Is this what you're giving me? Because once you do, it's mine and I will never surrender it.”

Mia had never felt more beautiful as she finished up her luxury spa treatment. She was a true angel and so very beautiful. Never before had women talked about such things with her. Skin, nails, hair. And not just the hair on her head! She took very careful notes of every detail, wanting to do them perfectly when she was finally with Jericho.

Exiting the bathroom, Mia heard them in the kitchen talking about a party happening the very next day. What kind of party was it? Would she be invited to it? Not that she wanted to be but...maybe she was becoming part of the family. It felt like it. They made her feel like it, anyway. Mia entered the kitchen and couldn't stop her smile at Mah-Mah and Belle Eveque's reaction.

"Oh my swamp stars, look at this angel," Mah-Mah cried, hurrying to her and looking her over. "You look like a princess!" she squealed, making Mia's pulse leap until she had to laugh from it. "I told you this butter-cup yellow would light her up!"

"Thank you," Mia said. "It's so very beautiful."

"It's too bad you couldn't go to that ball tomorrow," Mah-Mah said. "But there will be more to come."

"What...is a ball?" Mia wondered, sitting on one of the high seats at the large table in the center of the kitchen.

"That's a party for the Twelve," Mah-Mah said. "Here, try this and tell me what you think."

Mia took one of the round foods from the plate, wondering what kind of party did men have with balls and why it was too bad she couldn't go. "Mmmmmm," Mia said as the spicy flavor filled her mouth. "This is so very good."

"We could do a Christmas party next," Belle Eveque said. "She'll definitely go to that."

"You like it? That's my famous boudin balls, fried in bacon grease."

"I hope to learn this! Are these boudin balls for the...ball party?"

They both laughed and Mia smiled, helping herself to another one. She must bring one to Kaj.

"Yes, they are but the name is purely accidental. And fitting."

"Is this a contest party? My people do this with the men sometimes."

"No, this is a marriage party," Mah-Mah said. "Ever since Belle Eveque stole my son's heart, she's helped them all to realize they'd be better leaders if they had a woman that loved them, and they loved."

Mia stopped chewing.

“What’s wrong, that one too spicy?” Mah-Mah wondered.

“Just a little,” she said, lowering her head while her pulse raced.

Jericho was one of the Twelve.

“This Ball is going to be pathetic now that so many of the Twelve are no longer single,” Belle Eveque said, pulling something out of the oven and setting it on the counter with a smile.

Cookies, Mia saw, her stomach now in knots over which Twelve were no longer single.

“You’ll need to try one of these, Mia,” Belle Eveque said. “Soon as they cool off.”

“Well, we’ve got half still,” Mah-Mah said, looking at a notebook.

Belle Eveque slid her a cookie on a plate. “Homemade chocolate fudge cookies with pecans!” She regarded the list over Mah-Mah’s shoulder. “Did they ever give us their final five ladies?”

“They sure did. Bullets gave his yesterday, finally.”

“Wow,” Belle Eveque said with hands on her hips. “I’ll be so happy to have this ball behind us. Feels like we’ve been planning it for a year.”

“Would it be okay if I took some of this amazing food to my brother?” Mia asked, ready to run out of there where she could think and breathe.

“Oh of course!” Mah-Mah said, grabbing a dish from the cabinet behind her. “Let me load you up. Some for later too.”

Mia swallowed and remembered to smile, holding the end of her braid in both hands.

“Here you go, my dear,” Mah-Mah said. “We’ll be up cooking for a while if you get hungry again,” she added. “You need an escort, honey?”

“No mah-dahm,” she said, smiling and nodding. “Thank you both so much.”

“Mah-dahm,” Mah-Mah giggled. “I think I like that title.”

“Like what title?” a large man with silver hair said as she dashed out the door before needing to meet another person while needing to vomit.

She hurried her way to the small house, gasping when Juliette ran past her on the path. She looked behind her then back at the small cottage, seeing Kaj sitting on the porch. She hurried the rest of the way and up the steps, eyeing him in the dark.

“Kaj?” she called quietly.

“Hey,” he said, not looking up.

Mia looked at the big house, seeing Juliette entering. “Is everything okay with Juliette?”

“Just fine,” he said, his tone low and not fine at all.

“Did something happen with her? And...you?”

“Yes. And then no.”

He stood and she watched him brace his hands on the rail of the porch. “I kissed her. She kissed me too.” He shook his head. “I went too fast.”

“Too fast?”

“Yes. I scared her.”

“How?”

He turned and sat on the rail, crossing his arms. “By telling her what’s in my heart. All or nothing, I don’t want a taste of her, I could never just... taste her once and not have all of her. So I told her she can’t just give me a little, I want all or nothing. I just...” He shook his head, appearing baffled. “How did that happen?”

“What?” Mia wondered, moving to stand closer to him.

“Thirty minutes ago, I was a Priest that has never been with a woman, never thought of being with a woman, to being so far into this woman I can’t even fathom how I would live without her now.”

Mia’s heart dropped to her stomach at hearing it. “She...got scared you said. Maybe because she...”

“She’s scared that I’ll hurt her, that I’m lying to her.”

“Or...scared of it not being possible or...maybe she fears something will happen to take it away and...then she...”

“Mia, what’s wrong?” Kaj took the plate from her shaking hands and set it down, pulling her in a hug. “What happened sister?”

“There’s a ball tomorrow,” she fought to say around the pain. “A party for The Twelve. To find wives. The Twelve have agreed to marry and they all picked five women to attend and...” She shook her head, gasping for air as agony split her chest open. “I wasn’t invited. And Jericho is going.” She looked up at him, wiping her eyes, her breaths ragged.

“Are you sure about this, Mia?”

She nodded, wiping her tears. “Belle Eveque asked if Bullets gave the five women he was to choose from and he had. Yesterday. He’s going to the

party to pick a wife.”

“What did he tell you about all of it?”

She shook her head, gasping. “Nothing! He never mentioned marrying a woman, he only mentioned he was celibate!”

“Did he...”

She shook her head at hearing his anger, knowing what he was asking. “He did not but...he did things that meant he...loved me,” she choked.

“I will go talk to him.”

Mia grabbed his arm, panicked. “Brother, no! I will never beg a man this way! Don’t do this! If he wanted me, he would pick me.” She covered her mouth. Was this why he sent her away? “Promise me you won’t do anything. Maybe...maybe I’ve misunderstood,” she whispered, clutching his arm, not wanting him to carry out the murder she saw in his face. “That must be it, Jericho is a good man. You said so.”

“I will wait and see, sister. But if I learn he’s betrayed you this way, dishonored you in any way, I will *kill* him.”

She nodded, wiping her face. “And...Juliette will see in time that she is safe to give herself to you. I know it.”

“I don’t wish to stay here tonight,” he said. “You stay, I’ll return for you tomorrow.”

She shook her head a lot. “Don’t leave me. I want to come home with you.”

He hugged her tightly, petting her head. “I will never leave you anywhere you don't wish to be. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bullets stood in the Le Grand Maison dance hall with his five idiot single brothers, silently thanking the Big Man he was not them. He wouldn't rat them out and tell Eveque they rolled the Fate dice like a bunch of morons to pick a wife. The only problem *he* had was getting through the two-hour torture so he could leave and go see Kaj, his excuse to see Mia. And praying she wasn't taking his advice and stretching her wings someplace else. Then he'd sleep nearby and get her early the next morning. Or maybe at the stroke of fucking midnight he'd get his princess. She'd like that. Not as much as he would.

"Bruh," Hurricane whispered. "I can't look. Is she there?"

"She sure is," Shank said.

"Holy shit," Bacon muttered. "Mine's here too."

"Anybody see mine?" Spar wondered, shoving another boudin ball into his big mouth. And if she is, can somebody please tell me she sucks at taking pictures and looks half-way pretty?"

"I saw mine," Traps muttered. "She's the little stick in the corner wearing the black funeral dress as if she's coming to marry death."

"Maybe she changed her mind and is hoping you pass over her," Bullets said, spotting all five of the ladies he'd picked. He knew none of them past their application information. Unqualified was an understatement with him and this mess. He'd just as soon play Russian roulette, it was no less reckless, but what the fuck did he know? The Belle Eveque convinced all of them—probably with a fuck load of compelling—and they'd agreed. And he'd dodged that bullet by a hair. He needed to send Patches flowers for finding Mia. No, not flowers. Maybe flower seeds.

"Two-o'clock," Bullets said, just far enough away to stir shit without getting any on him. "Coming in hot. And heavy. I believe that's your numero uno, bluster boy."

"Fuck me," Hurricane strained with his back to her.

Bullets put his hand on the butt of his gun, intending to look

unapproachable for two hours straight if possible. He looked at his watch. An hour and forty-five.

“She ain’t so bad,” Spar barely said.

“Lie from the pit of hell,” Traps muttered. “And here I go to meet my tinder before she falls through the floor crack.”

“Go feed her,” Bacon suggested.

“I hear lots of skinny girls have fat cunts,” Shank whisper added in support, making Bullets grin.

He saw one of his picks coming and made his way to the door to avoid a head-on collision with that shiny blue dress so tight her legs could barely move as she hurried for him.

“Bullets!” she called out in a fucking yodel.

He hurried out the door and got halfway down the pier, realizing he had nowhere to go. He stopped with his eyes closed. Just *one more* fucking battle, then he was free.

“Bullets!” she laughed. “You runnin’ from me?”

He turned and faced her. “I was getting something I forgot out of the boat. I have terrible hearing.”

She stopped before him with a huge smile, holding a white gloved hand out. “I’m Darlene Leger, but...my friends call me Darlin. So you can too if you want.”

He put his hand at his ear. “I’m sorry, what?”

“My name is Darlene but my friends call me Darlin and you can too,” she said loudly with a lot of nods and a smile that showcased more gums than teeth. “You probably remember me from church. I’m the giver, I love to give. I made you my special strawberry cheesecake muffins? And my famous chicken noodle soup that one time you were sick? And the crocheted pot holders with the bullet shaped handles? Oh and that knitted jacket with the pockets?”

Dear God, she was the stalker. How the fuck did he end up picking her?

“How could I forget. All very...unique gifts. And kind of you.”

Her nose wrinkled with her giggle, and he looked around for something besides her ballooning cleavage to look at.

“Now, I was thinking,” she announced with a step closer, appearing concerned as she put a gloved hand on his chest. “I’m not trying to push you, but I just wanted to personally tell you that you have *always, always* been

my..." She covered her toothy smile briefly then pressed her lips together with a sneaky glare at him. "You've always been my dream husband. I can say that out loud since I made it on the top five!" she cried, like it was a game show.

He needed to let her know she wasn't the one, before she upped her gloved molestation game. "Darlene," he said.

"Oh, Darlin," she cooed. "You of all people surely can call me that."

"Darlene, I don't want to mislead you but...there are four other women here I'm considering."

She sucked in a breath. "Oh, I know! I'm just letting you know that none of them love you like I do. Lettie Babineaux is barren, and I bet she didn't put that on her application," she added in a mutter. "But you have a right to know I think, and I'm always looking out for you Jericho. And maybe it isn't that big of a deal but I've heard from a very reliable source she doesn't believe in shaving her armpit hairs. Nor does she groom any other places on her person." She leaned in closer and whispered. "They call her Lettie the Yeti." She let out a huge laugh, her hand covering all but her gums. "And let me tell you about—"

"Darlene," Bullets cut in. "Please don't take this the wrong way but... I have my eye on..." Fuck what were their names?"

"Please don't say Mary-Lou," she all but threatened.

"Yes, Mary-Lou," he decided, ready to end the conversation. "I happen to really like Mary Lou. She's...very kind."

She guffawed so big it put Bullets in mind of the gun on his hip. "Are we talking about the same Mary Lou?" she yelled dramatically. "The one that puts rabbit piss in her apple cider? Says it makes it smoother? *That* Mary Lou?"

"She's a respectable woman," Bullets said, looking around for an escape option. "I've known her family a long time." He struggled to remember a damn thing about her.

"Oh reeeeeeal respectable," she nodded, stepping closer to him. "Did you know she lied about her mangey dog being sick? Had everybody raise money for her and come to find out she was buying equipment to make moonshine!"

Holy gunpowder, was there even one good person he'd picked? "Everybody deserves the benefit of the doubt," he said, ready to go for a swim just to get away from her.

She shot a satin finger up at him. “I’m the one that deserves this, not her, Jericho.”

How the hell did she know his real name?

“I know everything about you, we share history! You told me I would make a fine wife,” she cried, getting louder before her face transformed into a blue demon as she stalked to him.

“I know what you like.” She grabbed his balls, and he jumped back, drawing his gun.

“Blast it, Darlene, do *not* touch me!”

“Are you gonna shoot me?” she cried, before gasping a laugh. “You think I don’t know how much you like your guns and bullets baby? Well, all you’re doing is turning me on,” she growled, coming for him again.

When pushing her in the water and shooting her in the kneecap were his only options, he spun and ran for the dance hall.

Shank opened the door and Bullets nearly took him out in head-on collision. “Whoa, cowboy.”

“She’s *fucking* grabbing dicks out there!” Bullets seethed, pushing him aside and pacing next to the food table, looking at his watch. Fucking hour and fifteen minutes still? He found his phone and hit Eveque’s number.

“Battle-Kin,” Eveque answered with a chuckle.

“I just got my dick grabbed out here and drew my gun on a woman. Is there any way I can get an emergency phone call out of this hell? There is something seriously wrong with these women. Darlene is either lying through her jumbo teeth or she *lied* on her application.”

Bullets finally made out what the wheezing was on the phone. “You’re fucking laughing.” He nodded, not at all surprised. “While our Bishop bastard is whacking his knee could you speak to Saint Sahvrin about throwing me a fucking line here? I don’t even know why we thought me coming was going to do any good. I just pissed off a demon in a satin blue straight jacket and pulled a *gun* on her. That’ll make the front page of the ball news, I’m sure. Why not *fire* me till this shit blows over or say I dropped dead, I don’t care.”

“Okay,” Bishop finally managed. “I do possibly have a bit of an emergency. But promise me you won’t lose your head, mon frier.”

Bullets froze, turning his back to the room of mis-match-making hell. “What?”

“I just got a call from Kaj. Did you happen to see Mia out there?”

“Mia, why would I see Mia?” he asked, his pulse thundering.

“She went to see if it was true.”

Oh fuck. “If what was true?”

“You were attending the marriage ball to pick a wife.”

“What?” he demanded, pissed. “And you told her what the fuck, right?”

“Well, I *would* have if I had talked to her. Don’t worry, I told Kaj. But he can’t find her. Thinks some dude named...Horan is with her.”

“*Horan*,” Bullets smirked. “Why him?”

“He took her to verify.”

“That...*fucking Vicki*.” Bullets paced like a wild animal. “How the fuck did this happen so quickly?” he shot out.

“Belle Eveque said she came over last night and thinks she got it from her. She didn’t know about Mia and you, that’s on me. She mentioned you attending for the marriage. They must’ve left during the night because the cottage they were supposed to sleep at was untouched.”

“Holy *fucks*, Eveque.”

“There’s another problem. But you gotta give me your word Jericho that you won’t do anything to wreck our relations with our new Viking allies.”

Bullets held his jaw together, closing his eyes before forcing the words out. “You have...my word. But only barely.”

He let out a sigh then, “Horan wants to challenge you.”

“Challenge *me*? For *what*?”

“For Mia.”

Bullets hung up and stormed out of the dance hall, heading for the boat. And to find that fucking Vicki and meet his challenge with his bare fists and teeth.

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TITLE: NOT SURE YET!

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